

## **Chapter 1**

Kirby did not know what mountains they were. He did know that the Mannlicher bullets of eleven bad Mexicans were whining over his head and whizzing past the hoofs of his galloping, stolen horse. The shots were mingled with yelps which pretty well curdled his spine. In the circumstances, the unknown range of snow mountains towering blue and white beyond the arid, windy plateau, offering he could not tell what dangers, seemed a paradise. Looking at them, Kirby laughed harshly to himself.

A beautiful face in the depths of a geyser—and Kirby plunges into a desperate mid-Earth conflict with the dreadful Feathered Serpent.

As he dug the heels of his aviator's boots into the stallion's flanks, the animal galloped even faster than before, and Kirby took hope. Then more bullets and more yelps made him think that his advantage might prove only temporary. Nevertheless, he laughed again, and as he became accustomed to the feel of a stallion under him, he even essayed a few pistol shots

back at the pack of frantic, swarthy devils he had fooled.

Three hours ago he had been eating a peaceful breakfast with his friend and commandant, Colonel Miguel de Castanar, in the sunlit patio of the commandant's hacienda. Castanar, chief of the air patrol for the district, had waxed enthusiastic over the suppression of last spring's revolutionists and the cowed state of up-country bandits. Captain Freddie Kirby, American instructor of flying to Mexican pilots in the making, had agreed with him and asked for one of the Wasps and three days' leave with which to go visiting in Laredo. The simple matter of a broken fuel line, a forced landing two hundred kilometres from nowhere, and the unlucky proximity of the not-so-cowed horsemen, were the things which had changed the day from what it had been to what it was.

The one piece of good fortune which had befallen him since the bandits had surrounded the wrecked Wasp, looted it, and taken its lone pilot prisoner, was the break he was getting now. During the squadron's first halt to feed, he had knocked down his guards and

made a bolt for the grazing stallion. So far, the attempt was proving worth while.

On and on the stallion lunged toward the white mountains. Kirby's eyes became red rimmed now from fatigue and the glare of the sun and the dust of the pitilessly bare plateau. A negligible scalp wound under his mop of straw-colored hair, slight as it was, did not add to his comfort. But still he would not give up, for the horse, as if it sensed what its rider needed most, was making directly for a narrow ravine which debouched on the plateau from the nearest mountain flank.

It was the promise of cover afforded by the jagged rocks and jungle growth of that ravine which kept hope alive in Kirby's throbbing brain.

The stallion was blown and staggering. Foam from the heavily bitted mouth flashed back in great yellow flakes against Kirby's dust-caked aviator's tunic. But just the same, the five mile gallop had carried both horse and rider beyond range of any but the most expert rifle shot. And Kirby knew that if his own

splendid mount was almost ready to crash, the horses of his pursuers must be in worse shape still. So for the third time since the fight had begun, he laughed. This time there was no harshness, but only relief, in the sound which came from his dry lips.

Ten minutes later, he flung himself out of his saddle. Like the caress of a vast, soothing hand, the shadowed coolness of the ravine lay upon him. As his feet struck ground, they splashed in the water overflowing from a spring at the base of an immense rock. At once Kirby dropped the reins on the stallion's neck, giving him his freedom, and as the horse lowered his head to drink, Kirby stooped also.

There was cover everywhere. Kirby's first move after pulling both himself and the horse away from the spring, was to glance up the long, deeply shaded canyon which he had entered—a gash hacked into the breast of the steep mountain as by a titanic ax. Then, reassured as to the possibilities for a defensive retreat, he glanced back toward the dazzling, bare plateau.

It was what he saw taking place amongst the sombreroed bandits out there which made the grin of satisfaction fade from his broad mouth. His last glance backward, before bolting into the canyon mouth, had showed him a ragged squadron of men left far behind, yet galloping after him still. But now—

Presently a puzzled frown made wrinkles in Freddie Kirby's wide sunburned forehead. He relaxed his grip upon the heavy Luger, which, in his big hands, looked like a cap pistol, and rubbed his eyes.

But he was not mistaken. The horsemen had halted! Out there on the glaring, alkali-arid plateau, they were standing as still as so many statues. Looking toward the canyon mouth which had swallowed their quarry, they certainly were, but they were halted as completely as men struck dead.

"Huh," Kirby grunted, and scratched behind his ear.

The next second he swung around to look at his horse, uncertain what he was going to do next, but aware of the fact that right now, with a lot of

unknown country between himself and Castanar's sunlit patio, the stallion was going to be a friend in need.

As he turned, however, prepared to take up the loose reins, something else happened. The stallion let out a neigh as shrill as a trumpet blast. As Kirby jumped, grabbed for the bridle, his fingers found empty air. Like a crazy animal the stallion leaped past him, barely missing him. Out toward the plain the horse jumped, out and away from the shaded canyon mouth, out toward the spot where other horses waited. And despite the animal's blown condition, the speed he put into his retreat left Kirby dazed.

After a helpless, profanity-filled second, Kirby scratched behind his ear again. As certain as the fact that almost his sole hope of getting back to civilization depended upon the stallion, was the fact that the brute did not intend to stop running until he dropped.

"Now what in the hell ever got into his crazy head?" Kirby muttered grimly.

Then he turned around to glance up the shadow-filled slash of a canyon, and sniffed.

“Huh!”

Faintly in the air had risen an odor the like of which he had never encountered in his life. A combination, it was, of the unforgettable stench which hangs over a battlefield when the dead are long unburied, and of a fragrance more rare, more heady, more poignantly sweet than any essence ever concocted by Parisian perfumer.

With the drifting scent came a sound. Faint, carrying from a distance, the rumble which Kirby heard was almost certainly that of a geyser.

There was no telling what had brought the troop of horsemen to a halt, but after a time Kirby knew that the cause of his horse's sudden departure must have been a whiff of the strange perfume.

For a long time he stood still, watching the crazy stallion dwindle in size, watching the line of

unexpectedly timid bandits. Then, when it became apparent that the horsemen were going to stay put either until he came out, or showed that he never was coming out, he shrugged, and swung on his heel so that he faced up the canyon.

The odor was dying away now, and the geyser rumble was gone. In Kirby's heart came a mingled feeling of tense uneasiness and fascinated curiosity.

Momentarily he was almost glad that his horse *had* bolted, and that his pursuers *were* blocking any lane of retreat except that offered by the canyon. If things had been different, the queer behavior of the Mexicans, the unaccountable actions of his horse and the equally strange growth of his own uneasiness might have made him uncertain whether he would go up the canyon or not. Now it was the only thing to do, and Kirby was glad because, fear or no fear, he wanted to go on.

"I wonder," he said out loud as he started, "just what the denizens of First Street in Kansas would say to a layout like this!"





## Chapter 2

At the end of an hour he was still wondering.

At midday the canyon was chill and dank, lit only by a half light which at times dwindled to a deep dusk as the rock walls beetled together hundreds of feet above his head. Always when he stumbled through one of the darkest passages, he heard and half saw immense gray bats flapping above him. In the half-lit reaches, he hardly took a step without seeing great rats with gray coats, yellow teeth, and evil pink eyes. But rats and bats combined were not as bad as the snakes. They were almost white, and nowhere had he seen rattlers of such size. If his caution relaxed for a second, they struck at him with fangs as long and sharp as needles.

The tortured, twisted cedars, the paloverdi, occatilla, cholla, opunti, through which he edged his laborious way, all offered an almost animate, armed hostility.

Altogether this journey was the least sweet he had taken anywhere. Yet he went on.

Why had eleven Mexican bandits refused to advance even to within decent rifle range of the canyon's mouth? What was there about the putrid yet gorgeous perfume that had made the stallion go off his nut, so to speak?

After a time, Kirby veered away from a fourteen-foot rattler which flashed in a loathsome coil on his left hand. Hungry, weakened by all he had been through since breakfast time, he plodded doggedly on.

But a moment later he stumbled past a twisted cedar, and then stopped, forgetting even the snakes.

At his feet lay the bleached skeleton of a man.

Beside the right hand, in a position which indicated that only the final relaxation of death had loosened his grip upon a precious object, lay a cylinder, carefully carved, of rich, yellow gold.

Of the science of anthropology Kirby knew enough to make him sure that the dolicocephalic skull and

characteristically shaped pelvic and thigh bones of the skeleton had belonged to a white man.

As for the cylinder—But he was not so sure what that was.

Regardless of the dry swish of a rattler's body on the rocks behind him, he lifted the object from the spot in which it had lain for no man knew how long. Of much the size and shape of an old-time cylindrical wax phonograph record, the softly gleaming thing weighed, he judged, almost two pounds.

Two pounds of soft, virgin gold of a quality as fine as any he had seen amongst all the treasures brought out of Mexico, Yucatan, and Peru combined!

But the gold was not the only thing. If Kirby was human enough to think in terms of treasure, he was also enough of an amateur anthropologist to hold his breath over the carvings on the yellow surface.

First he recognized the ancient symbols of Sun and Moon. And then a representation, semi-realistic, semi-

conventionalized, of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, known in all the annals of primitive Mexican religions.

Good enough.

But the mere symbols by no means told the whole story of the cylinder. The workmanship was archaic, older than any Aztec art Kirby knew, older than Toltec, older far, he ventured to guess, than even earliest archaic Mayan carvings.

God, what a find!

For a moment it seemed almost impossible that he, Freddie Kirby, native of Kansas, unromantic aviator, should have been the one to discover this relic of an unknown, lost race. Yet the cylinder of gold was there, in his hand.

After a long minute Kirby looked around him, then listened.

From up the canyon came the provocative rumble of the geyser. It was closer now, and Kirby, glancing at his watch which had been spared to him in the Wasp's crash, noted that just forty-four minutes had passed since the last eruption. There was nothing to be done about the bleached skeleton. So, tucking the precious cylinder into his tunic, Kirby headed on up the gash of a canyon.

Far away indeed seemed the neat, maple-shaded asphalt street, the rows of parked cars and farm wagons, the telephone office and drug store and bank, of the Kansas town where he had grown up.

Time passed until again he heard the geyser, and again was dizzied by the perfume. As the fragrance—close and powerful now—died away, he flailed with one arm at a two-foot bat which flapped close to his head.

And then he trudged his dogged way around a deeply shadowed bend, and found the chasm not only almost wholly dark, but narrower than it had been at any previous point.

“Holy mackerel,” Kirby groaned. “Phew! If this keeps up, I—”

He stopped. His jaw dropped.

“Oh, hell!”

The beetling walls narrowed in until the gash was scarcely fifteen feet wide. Further progress was barred by a smooth wall which rose sheer in front of him.

Kirby did not know how many seconds passed before he made out through the gloom that the wall was man-made and carved with the same symbols of Sun, Moon, and Feathered Serpent, which ornamented the cylinder of gold. But when he did realize at last, the shout with which he expressed his feeling was anything but a groan.

It simply meant that the skeleton which once had been a man, had almost surely found the golden cylinder beyond the wall and not in the canyon. And if

the dead man had passed that smooth, carved barrier, another man could do it!

Kirby jumped forward, began to search in the darkness for some hidden entrance.

Minute after minute passed. He gave another cry. He saw a long, upright crack in the stone surface, and a quick push of his hands made the stones in front of him give almost an inch.

All at once his shoulder was planted, and behind that square shoulder was straining all the muscle of his two hundred pound body. The result was all that he desired. When he ceased pushing, a slab of rock gaped wide before him, giving entrance to a pitch dark tunnel.

For a moment he held the portal back, then, releasing his pressure, he stepped into the dark passage. By the time a ponderous grating of rocks assured him that the door had swung shut of its own weight, he had produced matches and struck a light.



The puny flame showed him a curving passage hewn smoothly through the heart of bedrock. Before the flare died he walked twenty feet, and as another match burned to his fingers, he found the right hand curve of the passage giving way to a left hand twist. After that he dared use no more of his precious matches. But just when the darkness was beginning to wear badly on his nerves, he uttered a low cry.

As he increased his rapid walk to a run, the faint light he had suddenly seen ahead of him grew until it became a circular flare of daylight which marked the tunnel's end.

Out of the passage Kirby strode with shoulders square and head up, his cool, level, practical blue eyes wide with wonder. Out of the tunnel he strode into the valley of the perfumed geyser.

“God above!”

The words were vibrant with hoarse reverence. He saw the sunlight of a cliff-surrounded diminutive Garden of Eden. He saw a vale of flowering grass, of

palms and live oaks, saw patches of lilies so huge as to transcend belief, and dizzying clumps of tree cactus almost as tall as the palms themselves.

What was more, he saw in the center of this upland, cliff-guarded valley, a gaping black orifice which every faculty of judgment told him was the mouth of the geyser of perfume. And beside it, outstretched on a smooth sheet of rock which glistened as though coated with a layer of clear, sparkling glass, he saw—

Kirby blinked his eyes rapidly, hardly believing what he saw.

On the glistening rock lay the perfectly preserved figure of a Spanish Conquistadore in full armor. Morion and breast-plate were in place, and glistened as though they had been burnished this morning. And the Spaniard's dark, handsome, bearded face! Kirby saw instantly that no decay had touched it, that even the hairs of the beard were perfect. The whole armor-clad corpse gleamed softly with a covering of the same glassy substance which covered the rock.

Kirby glanced at his watch, saw that twelve minutes must elapse before the geyser spouted again. Then his eyes narrowed. He remained standing where he was, hard by the mouth of the tunnel, knowing that a wise man would conduct cautiously his exploration of this valley of wonders.

Arsenic! Silicon!

The two words stood out sharply in his thought. In Africa existed plenty of springs whose waters contained enough arsenic to bring death to those who drank. Might not the Spaniard's presence here be explained, then, by assuming that the geyser water was charged with a strong arsenic content, and, in addition, with some sort of silicon solution which, left to dry in the air, hardened to glass?

Lord, what a discovery to take back with him to Kansas! Almost it made the discovery of the golden cylinder pale by comparison. Why, the commercial uses to which this silicon water might be put were almost without limit, and the owner of the concession might confidently expect to make millions!

It was while Kirby stood there, breathless and jubilant, waiting for the geyser to spout, that he began to feel that *he was being watched*.

Suddenly, with a start, he shot a sweeping glance over the whole grove. But that did no good. He saw nothing save sunlight and waving green leaves.

Eleven days were to pass before he discovered all that was to be involved in that sensation of being gazed at by unseen eyes.

### **Chapter 3**

At the beginning of the eleventh morning in the valley, Kirby had again posted himself close to the mouth of the black tunnel, and again felt that hidden eyes were observing him.

But this morning differed from the first morning, because now, for the first time, he was ready to do something about the watcher or watchers.

Exploration of the whole valley had not helped.

Therefore, there lay at his feet a considerable coil of rope, the manufacture of which from plaited strands of the tough grass in his Eden had taken him whole days. With what patience he could find, he was waiting for the gigantic spout of milky-colored, perfumed water which would mean that the geyser had gone off and would erupt no more for exactly forty-four minutes.

Eleven days in the valley!

While he waited, Kirby considered them. Who had made the beautiful footprints beside him, when he

had slept at last after his arrival here? Why had so many of the queer, fuzzy topped shrubs with immense yam-shaped roots, which grew here been taken away during that first sleep, and during all his other periods of sleep? Who had taken them? Early in his stay, he had learned that the tuberlike roots were good to eat and would sustain life, and he supposed that the unseen people of the valley took them for food. But who were these people of the valley?

Who had laid beside him during his first sleep the immense lily with perfume like that which came with the milky geyser spray—that spray of death and delight mingled? Why had someone scratched a line in the earth from him directly to the distant orifice of the geyser? Was this, as he believed, a signal to come not only to the edge of the orifice, *but to lower himself down into its depths?* And if the line were intended as a signal, did the persons who came to the valley while he slept, always eluding him, wish him well or mean to do him harm?

Last question of all: had the beautiful girl's face he believed he had seen just once, been real or an

hallucination? It had been while he was kneeling at the very edge of the geyser cone, staring down its many colored throat, that the vision had appeared. Misty white amidst the green gloom, the face had been turned up to him, smiling, its lips forming a kiss, and its great eyes beckoning. Had the face been real or a dream?

Eleven days in the valley! Now, with his braided rope ready at last, he was going to do something which might help to answer his questions.

Kirby reached out and began to run his grass rope, yard by yard, through his hands, searching carefully for any flaw. A canyon wren made the air sweet above him, while the morning sun began to wink and blink against the shadows which still lay against the face of the guardian cliffs. Kirby glanced at his watch and got up.

Crossing beyond the mouth of the geyser, he grinned good morning at his friend the Conquistadore, and marched on into the shade of the live oak which grew nearest the geyser. Here he made one end of his rope

fast to the gnarled trunk, inspected his pistol, patted his tunic to make sure that the cylinder of gold was safe, then stood by to await the geyser.

With the passing of three minutes there came from the still empty orifice a sonorous rumbling. Kirby grinned.

From deep in the earth issued a sound of fizzing and bubbling, and then, to the accompaniment of subterranean thunder, burst loose the milky, upward column which had never ceased to awe the man who watched so eagerly this morning. As the titanic jet leaped skyward now, the slanting rays of the sun caught it, and turned the water, fanning out, into a fire opal, into a sheet of living color.

Kirby, hard headed to the last, drew from the supply in one pocket of his tunic, a strip of one of the tuberlike roots, and munched it.

The thunder ceased. The waters receded.



After that Kirby hesitated not a second. Promptly he moved forward, flung his coil of line down into the geyser tunnel, and swung on to the line. By the time he had swallowed the last bite of his breakfast, the world he knew had been left behind, and he was climbing down to a new.

It became at once apparent that the gorgeously colored, glassy-smooth throat glowed with tints which were unfamiliar to him. He could perceive these new shades of color, yet had no name for them.

As he stopped after fifty feet to breathe, the color phenomenon made him wonder if the tuber roots he had been eating had affected his vision; then decided they had not. In addition to food value, the roots had some power to stimulate courage and a slight mental exhilaration. But the drug had proved non-habit forming, and Kirby knew that his powers of perception were not now, and never had been, affected.

He swung down further.

Just a moment after he began that progress was when things began to happen to him. First he heard what seemed to be the low titter of a human voice laughing sweetly. Next came a far off, unutterably lovely strumming of music. And then he realized that, at a depth of about a hundred feet, he was hanging level with a hole which marked the mouth of another tunnel.

This new tunnel sloped down into the earth on his right hand. The floor and walls were glassy smooth, and the angle of descent was steep, but by no means as steep as the drop of the vertical geyser shaft in which he now hung.

Laughter, music, the new tunnel suddenly aroused an excitement which made him quiver.

“When I saw *her*,” he gasped, “she was standing here, in the mouth of this tunnel, looking up at me!”

Violently, Freddie Kirby forgot the maple-shaded street of his Kansas town, forgot everything but desire to reach the mouth of the new tunnel, where

the girl of the exquisite face and beckoning lips had stood. Tightening his grip on the rope, he began to swing himself back and forth like a pendulum.

It seemed probable that when the geyser water shot up past the horizontal tunnel, its force was so great that no water at all entered. He redoubled his efforts to widen his swing.

Then his feet scraped on the floor, and in a second he had alighted there. He still hung stoutly to his line, however, for the tunnel sloped down sharply enough, and was slippery enough, to prohibit the maintenance of footing unaided.

The music which issued from the depths of that stunningly mysterious passage swelled to a crescendo—and stopped. Kirby clung there to his precarious perch, his feet slipping on the glass under them with every move he made, and feelings stirred in his heart which had never been there before.

Then, as silence reigned where the music had been, something prompted him to look up. The next instant he stifled a cry.

With widening eyes he saw the flash of a white arm and the gleam of a knife hovering over the spot where his taut rope passed out of the geyser opening into the sunshine of the outer world. Again he stifled a cry. For crying out would do no good. While the suppressed sound was still on his lips, the knife flickered.

Then Kirby was shooting downward, the severed line whipping out after him. The first plunge flung him off his feet. A long swoop which he took on his back dizzied him. But as the fall continued, he was able to slow it a little by bracing arms and legs against the tunnel walls.

“Holy Jeehosophat!” he gurgled.

But there seemed to be no particular danger. The slide was as smooth as most of the chutes he had ever encountered at summer swimming pools. If ever the

confounded spiral passage came to an end, he might find that he was still all right. As seconds passed and he fell and fell, it seemed that he was bound for the center of the earth. It seemed that—

He swished around a multiple bend, and eyes which had been accustomed to darkness were blinded by light.

It was light which radiated in all colors—blue, yellow, browns, purples, reds, pinks, and then all the new colors for which he had no name. Somehow Kirby knew that he had shot out of the tunnel, which emerged high up in the face of a cliff, and that he was dropping through perfumed, brilliant air resonant with the sound of birds and insects and human cries. The funny thing was that the pull of gravity was not right, somehow, and he was dropping fairly slowly. From far below, a body of what looked like water was sweeping up to meet him. Kirby closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, his whole body was stinging with the slap of his impact, and he found that it was water which he had struck. The proof of it lay

in the fact that he was swimming, and was approaching a shore.

But such water! It was milky white and perfumed as the geyser flow had been, and it seemed luminous as with a radium fire. Had he not realized presently that the fluid probably contained enough arsenic to finish a thousand like him, he would have thought of himself as bathing in the waters of Paradise.

But then he began to forget about the poison which might already be at work upon him.

Ahead of him, stretched out in the gorgeous, colored light, ran a beach which was backed by heavy jungle. And on the beach stood the lovely creatures, all clad in shimmering, glistening garments, whose flutelike cries had come to him as he fell.

Kirby looked, and became almost powerless to continue his swim. The beauty of those frail women was like the reputed beauty of bright angels. That paralyzing effect of wonder, however, did not last long.

The girls moved forward to the water's edge, and, laughing amongst themselves, beckoned to him with lovely slender hands whose every motion was a caress.

"Be not afraid," called one in a curious patois dialect, about five-sixths of which seemed made up of Spanish words, distorted but recognizable.

"The water would kill you," called another, "as it killed the Spaniard in armor. But we are here to save you. I will give you a draught to drink which will defeat the poison. Come on to us!"

Kirby's heart was almost literally in his mouth now, because the girl who promised him salvation was she whose lips had formed a kiss at him from the green-gloomy throat of the geyser.

His feet struck a shale bottom. Panting, he stood up and was conscious of the fact that despite his forlornly dripping and dishevelled condition, he was tall and straight and big, and that for some reason all

of the girls on the gleaming sand, and one girl in particular, were anxious to receive him here.

The one girl had drawn a small, gleaming flask of gold from the misty bodice of her gown, and was holding it out while she laughed with red lips and great, dazzling dark eyes.

*“Pronto!”* she called in pure Spanish, and other girls echoed the word. “Oh,” went on the bright owner of the flask, “we thought you would *never* have done with your work on the rope. It took you so long!”

Kirby left the smooth lake behind him and stood dripping on the sand. The moment the air touched his clothes, he felt that they were stiffening slightly. Yet the sensation brought no terror. He could not feel terror as he faced the girls.

“Give him the flask, Naida!” someone exclaimed.



“Ah, but the Gods *have* been kind to us!” echoed another.

The girl with the flask made a gesture for silence.

“Is it Naida you are called?” Kirby put in quickly, and as he spoke the Spanish words, the roll of them on his tongue did much to make him know that he was sane and awake, and not dreaming, that this was still the Twentieth Century, and that he was Freddie Kirby.

Answering his question, Naida nodded, and gave him the flask.

“A single draught will act as antidote to the poison,” she said.

“I drink,” said Kirby as he raised the flask, “to the many of you who have been so gracious as to save me!”

A flashing smile, a blush was his answer. And then he had wetted his lips with, and was swallowing, a limpid liquid which tasted of some drug.

“Enough!” Naida ordered in a second.

As she reached for the flask, her companions closed in as though a ceremony of some sort had been completed.

“Is it time to tell him yet, Naida?” piped one of the girls, younger than the rest, whom someone had called Elana.

“Oh, *do* begin, Naida,” chorused two more. “We can’t wait *much* longer to find out if he is going to help us!”

Kirby turned to Naida, while a soothing sensation crept through him from the draught he had taken.

“Pray tell me what it is that I am to be permitted to do for you. I can promise you that the whole of my life and strength, and such intelligence as I possess, is yours to command.”

Excited small cries and a clapping of hands answered him. As for Naida, her face lighted with glowing joy.

“Oh, one who could say that, *must* be the friend and protector of whom we have stood in such bitter need!”

“What,” asked Kirby, “is this need which made one of you cut my rope, so that I should come here?”

A momentary silence was broken only by the hum of insects in the perfumed air, and by the golden thrilling of a bird back in the jungle. Then Kirby beheld Naida bowing to him.

“So be it,” she said in a voice low and flutelike. “I will speak now since you request it. Already you have seen that you are here in our world because we conspired amongst ourselves to bring you here. Our reason—”

She paused, looked deep into his eyes.

“Amigo,” she continued slowly, “we whom you see here are the People of the Temple. For more centuries than even our sages can tell, our progenitors have dwelt here, where you find us, knowing always of your outer world, but remaining always unknown by it. But now the time has come when those of us who are left amongst our race need the help of one from the outer races we have shunned. Dangers of various orders confront us who have waited here for your coming. When we first discovered you in the Valley of the Geyser, the idea came to me that we must make you understand our troubles, and ask of you—”

But then she stopped.

As Kirby stared at her, the gentleness of her expression was replaced by a swift strength which made her majestic.

The next moment bedlam reigned upon the beach.

“*They are after us!*” gasped one of the girls in terror.  
“Quick, Naida! Quick! Quick!”

Whatever it was that threatened, Naida did not need to be told that the need for action was pressing. She shouted at her companions some order which Kirby did not understand. From a pouch at her side, she snatched out a greyish, spherical vegetable substance which looked almost like a tennis ball. Then she braced herself as if to withstand an assault.

“Stand back!” she cried to Kirby.

He had long ago ceased to wonder at anything that might happen here. Disappointed that Naida’s story had been interrupted, wondering what was wrong, he obeyed Naida’s order to keep clear.

As he fell back and stood motionless, there came from behind a dense screen of shrubs which would have resembled aloe and prickly pear bushes, save that they were as big as oak trees, a ghastly howling. The next second, hopped and hurtled across the beach toward the girls, a group of hair-covered, shaggy creatures which were neither apes nor men. The faces, contorted with lust, were hideously leathery

and brown, the foreheads small and beetling, and the mouths enormous, with immense yellow teeth.

Helpless, Kirby realized that Naida and all the others had clapped over their faces curious masks which seemed to be made of some crystalline substance, and that now others had armed themselves with the tennis balls. And that was the last observation he made before the battle opened furiously.

With a cry muffled behind her mask, Naida leaped out in front of her squadron and cut loose her queer vegetable ball with whizzing aim and force.

Full into the snarling face of one of the ape-men the thing smashed, filling the air all about the creature with a yellow, mistlike powder. Kirby was half deafened by the yells of rage and terror which went up from the entire attacking band. The creature who had been hit fell to his knees the while he made agonized tearing movements at his face and uttered shrill, jabbering yelps.

Other balls flashed instantly from Naida's ranks, and each brought about the same ghastly result as the first. But then Kirby saw that the whole jungle seethed with the hairy, awful men.

"Keep back!" Naida shrieked at him through her mask. "We have no mask for you. If the powder from our fungi touches you, it will be the end!"

With gaps in the advancing line filled as soon as each screeching ape went down, the attackers leaped on until Kirby knew they would be upon the girls in a matter of seconds. A sweat broke out on his neck.

But then an idea gripped him, and suddenly, without even a last glance at Naida, he leaped away even as she had commanded.

A great boulder lay on the shore fifty yards away. Toward it Kirby streaked as though he had become coward. But he had not turned coward.

By the time he reached the shelter which would protect him from the fungus mist, a turning point had

come in the battle. The ape-men had closed in on the girls, were swarming about them, and the mist balls had almost ceased to fly. But the thing which gave Kirby hope was that the apes were not attempting to harm the girls. They seemed victors, but they were not committing atrocities.

It was the sharp intuition that something like this might happen which had sent Kirby fleeing from the fight. He believed he might yet prove useful.

The thickest group of attackers were jostling about Naida. As the screams and sobs of the girls quivered out, mingled with the guttural roaring of the men, Naida was shut off by a solid wall of aggressors.

Then Kirby saw her again. But now two of the most powerful of the ape-men had caught her up and was carrying her. Her kicking and writhing and biting accomplished nothing. The apes were headed directly back to the jungle.

Now, however, most of the yellow mist had disappeared, and that was all Kirby had been waiting



for. With a growling shout, he tore out from behind his boulder, his Luger ready. Naida's captors were in full retreat, and other pairs of men were snatching up other girls and hopping after them. Toward Naida Kirby ran madly but not blindly.

"Naida! Naida!" he bellowed.

He got in two strides for every one the apes made.

"Naida!" he shouted, and at last saw her look at him.

Her face was pallid with loathing and terror. As her glimmering dark eyes met his, they flashed a plea which made his heart thrash against his lungs.

With a final roar of encouragement Kirby closed in on the hair-covered men, and fired instantly a shot which caught one full in the heart. The creature wavered on its legs, looked at the unexpected enemy with dismayed, swinish little red eyes, and relaxing his hold upon Naida, dropped without making a sound.

After that—

But suddenly Kirby found himself unable to comprehend fully the other terrific results of his intervention. Before the echoes of his shot died, there came to him the rumble of what seemed to be tons of falling rock. In the bright air a slight mist was precipitated. To all of which was added the effect upon the ape-men of fear of a weapon and a type of fighter utterly new to them.

Kirby had fired believing that he would have to fight other ape-men when the first fell. But not so. Instead of that—

He blinked rapidly as he took in the scene.

Naida had been released. Lying on the sand beside the dead ape-man, she was looking up at him in stupefied wonder. And her other captor, instead of remaining to fight, had clapped shaggy hands over his ears, and was leaping headlong for the protection of the jungle!

Moreover, the soprano cries of the girls and the deep howls of the men were rising everywhere, and

everywhere the ape-men were dropping their captives and plunging away after their leader.

“Huh,” Kirby muttered aloud, and wondered what the citizens of Kansas would have to say about *this*.

Naida looked at the dead and bleeding ape-man and shuddered, and then at the score or so of others brought down by the puff balls. Then she looked up at Kirby, raised her arms for his support, and smiled up into his brown face.

Kirby forgot Kansas, lifted her, warm and alive, radiantly beautiful, in his arms.

“Our friends the enemies,” she whispered as she remained for a second in his embrace and then drew away, “will attack no more this day—thanks to you.”

There was no possible need for another shot, Kirby saw. In terrified silence, the first of the apes had already floundered behind the prickly pear and aloe bushes, and the last stragglers were using all the power in their legs to catch up. On the beach, Naida’s

followers were picking themselves up, and already a few of them had burst into ringing laughter.

“Come on, all of you,” Naida said to them, and, including Kirby in her glance, added, “We may as well go to the caciques now, and have it over with.”

## Chapter 4

It was with Naida at his side and the other girls grouped about them, that they started their journey to the “caciques,” whoever they might be, “to have it over with,” whatever that might mean. As they strode along in silence, Kirby did what he could to straighten out in his mind the many curious things which had happened since he sat testing his rope in the upper world this morning.

In final analysis, it seemed to him that, extraordinary as his experience had been, there was nothing so much out of the way about it, after all. The only unusual thing was the existence of this inhabited pocket in the earth. For the rest, the strange colors to which he could not put a name, were simply some manifestation of infra-reds and ultra-violets. And then the startling effect of his single shot at the ape-men—that was simply the old story of savage creatures running from a new weapon and a new enemy; naturally the shot had sounded loud in this enclosed cavern. Lastly, the pull of gravity down here seemed upset somehow. But why should it not seem so, at this

distance within the earth? The American was no scientist; the conclusions he reached seemed very reasonable to him.

All told, the last thing Kirby found he needed to do was pinch himself to see if he was awake.

A place of indefinite extent, the cavern seemed to be exactly what he had already judged it—a giant pocket within the earth. The ceiling, or the sky, was of some kind of natural glass—no doubt the same kind which was crackling on his clothes now—and from it emanated the brilliant, many colored glow which lighted the cavern. Radium? Perhaps it was that. Perhaps the rays were cast off from some other element even less understood than mysterious radium. As for the plant and animal life with which the cavern teemed, it was amazing.

But Kirby did not give himself up to silent observation any longer.

“Will you finish telling me,” he asked of Naida, “about the task I am to perform for you here?”

Naida, walking with lithe strides along a path jungle-hemmed on both sides, smiled at him.

“You are to be our leader.”

“Yes?”

Now both Naida and the other girls became sober.

“You will lead us in a revolt.”

“Ah!” Kirby whistled softly.

“In a revolt against the caciques—the wise men—whose kind have governed the People of the Temple since the beginning.”

Her statement was received with acclaim by the whole troop, who crowded close around, the while they smiled at Kirby.

“You mean I am to lead a revolt,” he asked, “against these same caciques whom we are going now to face?”

Naida nodded emphatically.

“Yes, if revolt proves necessary. And it probably will.”

“Hum.” Kirby scratched behind his ear. “You’d better tell me what you can about it.”

Then, as they hurried on, Naida spoke rapidly.

The situation before the People of the Temple was that for a long time now, the only children to be born had been girls. Worse still, not even a girl had been born during a period equal to sixteen upper-world years. The only remaining members of a race which had flourished in this underground land for countless thousands of years, consisted of the caciques, a handful of aged people, and the thirty-four girls, including Naida, who accompanied Kirby now.

On one hand was promised extinction through lack of reproduction. On the other, even swifter and more terrible extinction at the hands of the ape-men, whom Naida called the Worshippers of Xlotli, the Rabbit God, the God of all bestiality and drunkenness.



It was the menace of the ape-men, rather than the less appalling one of lack of reproduction, which was making the most trouble now. Ages ago, when the People of the Temple had flourished as a race, they had been untroubled by the Worshipers of Xlotli. But now the ape-men were by far the stronger; and they desired the girls who had been born as the last generation of an ancient race. The battle of this morning had been only one of many.

Dissension between the caciques, who ruled the People of the Temple, and their girl subjects, had arisen on the subject of the best way of dealing with the ape-man menace.

Some time ago, Naida, heading a council of all the girls, had proposed to the caciques that support be sought amongst the people of the upper world. This would be done judiciously, by bringing to the lower realm a few men who were wise and strong, men who would make good husbands, and who could fight the ape-men.

This proposal the priests had promptly quashed. They would never receive, they said, any members of the teeming outer races from whom the People of the Temple had so long been hidden. Those few who had blundered into the Valley of the Geyser during the centuries, and who had never escaped, were enough. Better, said the caciques, that a compromise be arranged with the subjects of the Rabbit God.

Flatly then, the priests had proposed that some of the girls, the number to be specified later, should be given to the ape-men, and peace won. During the time of reprieve which would thus be afforded, prayers and sacrifices could be offered the Lords of the Sun and Moon, and to Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent. In answer to these prayers, the Gods would surely send the aged people who alone were left as prospective parents, a generation of sons.

Once the priests' program of giving up some of the girls to the ape-men had been made definite, it had not taken Naida and the others long to decide that they would never submit. And then, while matters

were at an acute stage, a tall, blond white man had come to the Valley of the Geyser—Kirby.

As Naida had finished her story, Kirby mustered a smile despite the soberness which had come upon him.

“So the white man came,” he repeated after her, “and all of you decided forthwith to stage your revolt.”

“Why not?” Naida answered. “We observed you until we were sure you possessed the qualities of leadership we wanted. After that, we did what we could to coax you to come here.”

Kirby grinned at that.

“Now,” Naida ended simply, “we will go to the caciques. If they accept you, and grant our requests to them, there will be peace. If they rage, it will be war.”

Suddenly she drew closer to Kirby as they swung along, and slipped her hand into his, looking up at him in silent entreaty.

“How much farther,” he asked in a voice which became sharp, “until we reach the headquarters of these caciques?”

“They live in a castle which our ancestors built ages ago on a protected plateau,” Naida answered tensely. “It is a good distance still, but we will cover it soon enough.”

They crossed now one edge of a shadow-filled forest composed principally of immense, pallid palmlike trees. Farther on, the path wound through a belt of swampy land covered by gigantic reeds which rustled above their heads with a glassy sound, and by things which looked like the cat-tails of the upper world, but were a hundred times larger. Everywhere hovered odd little creatures like birds, but with teeth in their long snouts and small frondlike growths on each side of their tails. About some swamp plants with very large blooms resembling passion flowers, flitted

dragon flies of jeweled hues and enormous size, and under the flowers hopped strange toadlike creatures equipped with two pair of gauzy wings.

Finally, through a tunnel composed of ferns a hundred feet high, they emerged to a still densely overgrown but higher country which Naida said was a part of the Rorroh forest.

In the forest, Kirby gained a hazy impression of bronzy, immense cycads and what appeared to be tree chrysophilums with gorgeous blossoms. Then he received a much clearer impression of other trees with blossoms of bright orange yellow and very thick petals, each tipped with a glassy sharp point. The disconcerting thing about the tree was that, as they approached, the scaly limbs began to tremble and wave, and suddenly lashed out as though making a human effort to snatch at the bright travelers.

Naida and all the others hurried along without offering comment, and Kirby asked no questions.

Once he thought he saw a group of gorilla creatures parallelling their course back amongst the forest growth, but if Naida observed the animals, she paid no attention. The one thing which had any effect upon the company was the appearance, presently, of two vast, birdlike creatures. As these things approached, Naida signaled to all to crouch beneath the shelter of a tall rock beside the path.

Enormous, the birds had bat wings, and carried with them, as they approached, the stink of putrid flesh. The long beaks were overfull of sharp teeth. The heads, set upon bodies of glistening white-grey, were black. Reddish grey eyes searched the jungle as the creatures flapped along. But, the Pterodactyls—if they were that—passed above Naida's band without offering attack, and presently Naida gave the command to advance again.

In time, they came to a chasmlike gorge across which was suspended a slender long thread of a bridge. Not far above the bridge, a considerable river emptied itself into the gorge in a mirrorlike ribbon. Kirby could not hear the torrent fall—or rather could not

hear it strike any solid bottom. But from somewhere in the unlighted, unfathomed depths of the abyss rose strange bubbling and whistling sounds.

At the bridge, Naida paused and pointed to the land across the river. And as Kirby looked in the direction indicated, he beheld a rocky eminence rising for several hundred feet straight up from the expanse of a level, tree and grass covered plain. Atop of the plateau, glimmered the complex towers and turrets, the crenellated walls of a castle which, in its grey antiquity, seemed as old as the race of men.

“It is behind those walls that the caciques dwell,” Naida said quickly. “It is behind the castle, in a series of separate houses, that the older members of the race dwell. We shall go and look upon them presently. But first we will force an interview with the caciques.”

In silence Kirby took her hand, and, with the others following, they moved out upon the swaying, perilous causeway which hung above the chasm. After that, the trip across the plain to the foot of the plateau cliffs was quickly accomplished.

Here, however, Kirby thought they must face trouble, for he found that the great walls, of a sparkling, almost glassy smoothness, shot up to a height of at least three hundred feet, and that no path of any sort was visible.

“We’re here,” he said, “but how can we get up?”

But understanding began to dawn as Naida laughed, and produced from the pouch at the side of her gauzy dress four pliable discs of a substance which resembled rubber.

“You are very strong, are you not?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you will have no trouble in following us up the cliff. Our Serpent God, Quetzalcoatl, taught us how to climb long ago.”

With that she handed Kirby the set of vacuum discs, and producing another for herself, moistened them in a pool of water close at hand. Then, as all of the girls



followed her action, she strapped them to her hands and feet, and in a moment they had begun the ascent.

“Why,” Kirby said presently, “with these things you could hang by your feet and walk on a smooth ceiling!”

Naida laughed, and they worked their way upward.

When the climb was accomplished and the discs were put away, Kirby found himself standing on the outer edge of a mediaeval paradise, of a magnificent plateau partly fortified by nature, partly by the hand of man.

“Ah!” he cried in deep admiration, then followed Naida.

The building—the castle—in the near distance, resembled a castle of Spain, save that there was greater beauty and subtlety of architecture. Turreted on all four corners, constructed of material which looked like blocks of natural glass, the fairylike structure was crowned by a gigantic tower of

something which resembled obsidian. Up and up this tower soared until its gleaming black tip seemed almost to touch the glassy-radiant sky of the cavern.

No people showed themselves, and Kirby saw that the bronze-studded portals set in the front of the castle were closed.

Admiringly, he glanced at the surrounding land laid out in checkerboard patches of gardens and orchards where grew a bewildering variety of unknown fruits and blooms. Butterflies drifted past, and the air was freighted with the scent of flowers. Inside a walled enclosure, Kirby saw a good-sized plot heavily grown with the plant on which he had been subsisting. As they passed this ground, each of the girls, Naida leading, made a strange little bowing, gliding genuflection, and Kirby wondered.

Now, however, new sights distracted him as they crossed a port drawbridge above a deep moat which was a fairyland of aquatic plants. Although not a sound had come from the castle, the great entrance doors were swinging back.

“Be ready,” Naida whispered, “for almost anything. The doors are being opened by some of the palace guard. I have little doubt that word was long ago rushed to the caciques that we are come to them with an upper-world man!”

Kirby answered with a nod. Then they passed the outer doors, passed inside, and Kirby blinked at what he saw.

In a long hall decorated bewilderingly with a carven frieze in which appeared all of the symbols common to early Mexican religions, and many new ones, stood a row of bright suits of armor of the Sixteenth Century. From each suit peered the glassy face and shovel beard of a dead Conquistadore.

So this was what happened to intruders from the upper world! The Conquistadore who kept his long watch beside the geyser was not the only one! Kirby felt an involuntary chill prickle up his back. But he was not given long to think before Naida, ignoring the gruesome array, clasped his arm.

“Look! Behold!”

And Kirby saw that with almost magical silence the whole wall at the end of the corridor was sliding back to reveal an enormous amphitheatre in the center of which stood a vast circular table. Ranged in a semicircle about that table, stood fifteen incredibly ancient men clad in long, glistening grey robes. Blanched beards trailed down the front of the garments until they all but touched the floor.

The caciques!

Kirby, on the threshold of the amphitheatre, squared his shoulders and held his head high. Then with Naida on his right, his own eyes boring unyieldingly into the smouldering, narrowed eyes which stared at him, he advanced.

But in front of him the priests moved suddenly. From Naida burst a shriek. In the radiant glare of the council room flashed the long, thin, cruel blade of a sacrificial knife.

The cacique who had whipped it from his robe flew at Kirby with a condor swoop, talon-hands outstretched, his wrinkled, bearded face contorted with fury.

## Chapter 5

Before Kirby was more than half set to fight, the priest was clawing at his throat, and a gnarled old fist was poised to drive the knife in a death stroke.

Kirby did the only thing he could do quickly—sprang to one side. The move saved him. The knife whipped past his shoulder, and the cacique nearly fell. But it had been a close enough squeak for all that.

Nor was it over. After Kirby the priest sprang with unexpected agility, and before Kirby could snatch at his pistol the talon-hands were lunging at his throat once more.

With the gasps of the girls ringing in his ears, Kirby bunched himself for another side leap only to find the cacique all over him like an octopus. Momentarily the knife hung above his chest, and Kirby, dismayed at the powers of his opponent, almost felt that the thing must plunge before he could break the octopus hold.

But he had no intention of being defeated, and now he was getting used to the fight. The priest's left arm swiftly clenched about his neck and shoulders, and the right arm, with the knife, attempted a drive through to the heart. Suddenly, however, Kirby lurched sideways and backward, and as the octopus grip slackened for a flash, he himself got a wrestler's grip that left him ready to do business. As the priest broke free, he slid around in an attempt to fasten himself on Kirby's back. Quickly, tensely Kirby doubled, and knew that he had done enough. The cacique shot over his shoulders, described a somersault in midair, and landed with a sharp crack of head and shoulders against unyielding stone.

From the semicircle of other priests went up a gasp. From Naida came a strangled cry of joy. Kirby made one leap for the knife which had fallen from the cacique's hand as he slumped into unconsciousness, and then he straightened up with the weapon safe in his possession.

"There, you old billygoat," he croaked in English, "maybe you won't try any more fast ones for awhile."

A second later he stepped over the sprawled body to stand beside Naida.

Upon the wrinkled countenances of the remaining caciques was stamped a look of dismay and hatred which boded no good. It was plain to Kirby that in battering up the man detailed to kill him, he had committed a desecration of first order.

“Is there anyone else who cares to fight?” he flung at them in Spanish, showing a contempt as great as their rage.

The response he got was instant. From one old gullet, then from others, came choking, snarling sounds which presently became words. By those words Kirby heard himself cursed with a vituperation which made him, even in his temporary triumph, feel grave.

But he did not let that soberness trouble him long. For the main point now was that no one made a move to fight further, which was what he had expected. He had flung them the challenge, knowing that he was possessed of their knife, and suspecting that it was



their only weapon. The belief that no one would care to try a barehanded conflict, no matter what insult was waiting to be avenged, seemed justified as none of the caciques advanced, and as even the cursing presently ceased.

“No?” Kirby asked. “There is to be no more fighting?”

One of the caciques now came forward a few steps.

“No,” he answered with a lameness which was not to be denied. “But you, a criminal interloper in our realm, have been marked as a victim for sacrifice, and from this there is no power in the universe which can save you.”

Kirby, after a reassuring glance at Naida, looked at the floored priest who was sitting up now, looking stupidly about, and feeling himself all over, and Kirby suppressed a grin.

“Ah, I am to be sacrificed, eh? But what happens until that time comes? Listen my Wise Ones—”

He stabbed a finger at them, and his eyes flashed.

“Listen! What you mean to say is that I have defeated you, and you must lay off me until you can launch another attack. But I have a few things to say to that. One is that I am not going to permit myself to *be* sacrificed. Another is that I demand, right here and now, that you begin to discuss with me certain agreements which are going to regulate the future conduct of affairs in this world to which I have come.”

A low exclamation answered that, but it came from no priest. They remained sullen and staggered. It was Naida who murmured, and there was excitement and pleasure in her voice. Suddenly she placed her lips against Kirby’s ear.

“You must not treat with them,” she said. “Tell them you want to see the Duca, and will destroy them all unless he comes!”

Understanding burst over Kirby. The Duca! Then these men were only the representatives of a High Priest, the Duca!

“Yes,” he repeated resolutely to the assembled greybeards, “a meeting is going to be held in this chamber of council at once. But I will not deal with you! Do you understand me? I must see the Duca. I leave it to you to decide whether you will summon him, or force me to fight my way through to wherever he is staying.”

“The Duca!”

The words burst in dismay from the gimlet-eyed cacique who had said there would be no more fighting. He looked at Naida, well aware of the fact that it was her interference which had made Kirby extend his demand. And his look was black.

Kirby slid between Naida and the cacique.

“Yes,” he spat out, “the Duca! Will you summon him, or—”

He did not repeat what he would do as an alternative. A second passed in silence. It seemed as if the cacique who had been speaking was ready to burst.

“Answer me!” Kirby thundered.

And then the priest obeyed.

“Very well,” he growled in a voice which quaked with rage. “I obey. But you will wish you had never made the demand!”

The next second he swung on his heel, and leaving his company behind as a guard, headed toward a stair which led upward from one side of the amphitheatre, and which was protected by a door of heavy, grilled metal work. The stairway seemed to be spiral, and was all enclosed. Kirby realized that it must lead into the tall and beautiful tower of obsidian which he had seen outside.

“Oh,” Naida whispered as looks and smiles of approval came from all of the girls, “you have been magnificent! Mark now, what we must do. You must

be the one to state our terms, because you have already won a victory for us. Tell the Duca that we will not submit to any compromise with the ape-men, and least of all will we let any of our number go to the ape-men."

A deep flush crept into Kirby's cheeks at thought of what he would like to do to the man who had proposed that sacrifice.

"Then tell him," Naida continued, "that we want men brought to our world from the world above. And finally tell him we will live under his dictatorship no longer, and hereafter demand a voice in all councils affecting temporal affairs."

"All right," Kirby spoke grimly. "I'll tell him. Naida, is this high priest we're waiting for, the one who proposed sacrifice of some of you to the apes?"

Naida nodded.

Next moment, she, Kirby, and all the others, including the row of glowering caciques, became silent. At

sounds from above, all looked toward the grilled doorway to the tower. Then Kirby realized that all of the girls, as well as the caciques, were dropping to their knees.

“No!” he commanded quickly. “Get up! You must not abase—”

He had not finished, and Naida had scarcely risen, when the heavy door swung on noiseless hinges.

The light in the amphitheatre seemed to become more intense. Then, against the great glow, Kirby beheld majesty, beheld one who represented the apotheosis of priestly rank and power.

Clad in robes of filmy material which glimmered white beside the gray robes of his underlings, the Duca wore about his waist the living flame of a girdle composed of alternate cut diamonds and blood red rubies each larger than a golf ball. And Kirby, searching for comparisons, realized that the Duca’s face, upheld to others, would be as remarkable as his jewels must be when compared to ordinary gems. It

was a chiseled face, seamed by a thousand wrinkles, which a god might have carved from ivory before endowing it with the flush and glow of life. A mane of snow white hair cascaded back from a tremendous forehead to fall about thin but square shoulders and mingle with the downward sweep of pure white beard. The eyes, black as polished jet, flamed now with the glare of baleful fires.

As Naida, stealing close to Kirby, trembled, and even the abased caciques trembled, Kirby himself felt as if icy water was trickling over him.

He fought the sensation off. For suddenly he knew that in spite of first impressions which made the man seem a living god, the old Duca was human. And what was more, he was in the wrong. All of which being true, the thing to do was keep a level head and fight.

All at once Kirby spoke across the silence in the great room.

“I have sent for you,” he said, weighing words carefully.

“And I,”—the Duca’s voice was mellow and deep —“have come. But I am not here because you summoned me.”

“Oh!” Kirby let sarcasm edge his words. “Well, I won’t quibble about your motives for coming. Did my messenger tell you why we are here and demand your presence?”

“Your messenger,” the old man said calmly, “told me.”

“Very well. Do you consent to listen to Naida’s and my terms? If you *will* listen—”

“But wait a moment,” the Duca interrupted, still calmly, but with a look in his eyes which Kirby did not like. “Are you asking *me*, to my face, whether I will listen to terms which you offer as self-styled victor of a battle with my caciques?”

Kirby nodded. His apprehension increased.

“Ah,” said the Duca softly. And then, amazingly, a smile deepened every wrinkle of his parchment face.



“But do you not remember that I said I had *not* come here because you summoned me?”

“Yes,” Kirby said solidly. “I remember very well.”

“The thing which brought me here was the failure of my followers to accomplish an assignment which I had given them—namely, that of ending your life.”

“Hum.” Kirby scratched behind his ear. “You are *not* interested in arranging terms of peace, then.”

“I am here,”—suddenly the Duca’s voice filled the room—“to do that which my priests were unable to do. And the moment has come when the Gods will no longer trifle with you. You dog! You thieving intruder! You—”

Swiftly the Duca plunged one withered but still powerful hand into the folds of his robe above the flaming girdle. Then his hand flashed out, and in it he held—

But Kirby did not get to see.

A strangled cry of terror smote his ears. Naida leaped toward him from one side, while Elana, the lovely youngest girl, sprang from another direction, hurled Naida aside, and stopped in front of Kirby.

Through the glaring room flickered a tiny red serpentine creature which the Duca hurled from a crystalline tube in his hand. As the minute snake struck Elana's breast, she gave a choked cough, and then, as she half turned to smile at both Naida and Kirby over her shoulder, her eyes went blank, and she collapsed gently to the polished stones of the floor—dead.

A second later came squirming out from under her the ghastly, glimmering little snake which had struck.

Slowly, while every mortal in the room stood paralyzed, Kirby stepped forward and set his heel upon the writhing thing. When he raised his boot, the snake was only a blotch on the floor.

The Duca was standing as still as girls and caciques. The laughter with which he had started to greet what he had thought would be Kirby's extermination had faded to a look of wonder—and fear. He was an easy mark.

Up to him Kirby rolled, and with all the force of soul and muscular body, drove his fist into the Duca's face.

"By God," he roared, "you want war, and you shall have it!"

The Duca was simply out—not dead. Since Kirby did not want him dead, he did not strike again, but swung back from the sprawled body, faced Naida, and pointed to the tower door.

"Up there!" he snapped. "Seize the tower. I have a reason!"

At the Duca's crashing downfall, had come to the caciques a tension which made Kirby know they would not be dummy figures much longer. His eyes never left them.

“Quick, Naida!” he snapped again. “We must hold the tower!”

Naida, all of the girls, were staring dazedly at Elana, dead.

“The tower!” she choked. “But we cannot go there. It is the Duca’s!”

“Because it is the Duca’s,” Kirby said firmly, “is exactly why we must hold it. Come, Naida, please—”

And then he saw comprehension begin to dawn at last.

He also saw two of the caciques glide from the wooden line, and slink toward him past the unconscious Duca, stealthily.

As Naida suddenly cried out to her companions, pushed at two of them, and then darted like a rainbow

nymph toward the silent and forbidding upward spiral of steps, Kirby faced the gliding caciques.

One he clutched with viselike hands, and lifted him. As the other shrieked and sprang, he was mowed down by the hurtling body of his fellow priest which Kirby flung forward mightily.

The rest of the caciques were howling. While Naida waited beside the tower door, the other girls flashed up the steps. The Duca still lay where he had fallen, a thread of blood oozing from his mouth. Kirby, after his last look over all, solemnly stooped and gathered in his arms the limp, radiant little body of the girl who had given her life that her friends might be left with a leader.

A moment later, he was standing on the steps. Naida, unopposed by the still stupefied caciques, swung shut the tower door and shot a double bolt.

“Naida—” Kirby whispered as he held Elana closer to him, “oh, I am so sorry that we could have won only at such a price.”

As Naida stooped to kiss the pale little forehead with its halo of golden hair, sobs came. But then she raised her eyes, and they were, for Kirby, alight with the message that she could and would accept Elana's sacrifice, because she would gladly have made it herself.

"We will not forget," she whispered. "Carry her tenderly, and come."

For better, for worse, the Duca's tower was theirs.

## Chapter 6

At the end of an hour, Kirby was taking a turn of guard duty at the foot of the steps, while the others remained with Elana in a chamber above. To Kirby, with things thus far along, it seemed that the seizure of the tower had proved a shrewd stroke.

It seemed that the tower was to the Duca what hair was to Sampson. From Naida had come the information that the Duca lived hidden within the great shaft of obsidion, and appeared but seldom even before his caciques. Apparently a large part of his hold upon his subjects was maintained by the mystery with which he kept himself surrounded. And now his retreat was lost to him! Such had been the moral effect of the loss upon both Duca and caciques, that his whole first hour had gone by without their doing anything.

Kirby, standing just around the first turn of the winding stairway, presently cocked his ears to listen to the conclave being held in the amphitheatre.

“Why not starve them out, O Holy One?” he heard one of the caciques ask of the Duca, only to be answered by a growl of negation.

The Duca, Kirby had gathered before this, wanted to fight.

“But there is no food in the tower, is there?” the cacique still pressed on, and this time he was supported by other voices.

“No,” the Duca rumbled back. “But am I to be deprived of my retreat, left here like a common dog amongst other dogs, while these accursed fiends starve slowly to death? No! I tell you, you must fight for me!”

But he had told them so several times before and nothing had happened. Kirby grinned at the thought of the caste the Duca was losing by being driven to this belittling parley.

“Holy One,” exclaimed a new priest in answer to the urge to fight, “what can we do against the golden



haired fiend? The stairs are so narrow that he could defend them alone. And then there are the gates of bronze. If we could shatter the first, at the foot of the steps, we should only encounter others. The Duca must remember that his tower was built to withstand attack."

"Even so," the Duca snapped back, "it must be attacked! I—"

But then he fell silent, having been made so by the sounds of dissension which arose amongst his caciques. Kirby, laughing to himself, turned away from his listening post, and tip-toed up the steps.

After he had closed and bolted behind him three of the bronze portals so feared by the caciques, he turned to the entrance of the chamber in which he had left Naida and the others. Here all was silent, and he found his friends grouped about a couch on which lay Elana. Feeling the solemnity of the moment, he would have taken his place quietly amongst the mourners.

Naida, however, came to him at once, and in a low voice asked for news from the amphitheatre, and when Kirby answered that the caciques were unanimously in favor of leaving them alone until they starved, she exclaimed:

“Oh, then it is good news!”

After that, however, a shadow of doubt flickered in her great eyes.

“And yet, is it? It means temporary immunity, of course. But—starvation!”

Kirby assured her with a grin.

“If we had to starve we might worry. But there is more food here than the Duca thinks. Look!”

From a bulging pocket of his tunic he fished a strip of the roots on which he had subsisted so comfortably. Naida’s eyes widened, and several of the girls gave low cries.

“Yes,” Naida exclaimed, “but such food! Why—why, do you know what you are offering us? Why, this is the sacred Peyote! Only the Duca eats it, and, at rare intervals, his priests.”

Kirby was really startled now.

“But surely you and the others have taken quantities of the stuff away from the Valley of the Geyser. Do you mean—”

“Because we gathered the Peyote does not mean that we have ever tasted it. We gather it for the Duca. To taste would be complete, utter sacrilege. Have *you* been eating it?”

Inwardly Kirby was chuckling at this added proof of the buncumbe with which the Duca—and other Ducas—had fooled all.

“Of course I’ve been eating the Peyote.”

“And—and nothing has happened to you?” Naida asked.

“Hardly. I certainly haven’t been blasted by the Lords of the Sun and Moon, or the Serpent either!”

Naida and all the others were silent. The conflict between their reverence for the food and their clear desire to eat it, now that it was become the food of their leader, was pathetic.

Kirby put one of the strips in Naida’s hand.

“Why not?” he asked. “We have bested the Duca in fair fight. We have seized his tower. Why not eat his food?”

As he had hoped it would, the suggestion at last settled the matter. A moment later, as Naida nibbled her first bite, she smiled.

“Why, it—it’s good!”

With the question of provisions settled at least for a time, Kirby’s next thought was of the tower. The present lull of peace seemed made for exploration.

“Come along,” he said to Naida, “we’ve plenty to do,” and then, when he explained, they set out, accompanied by Nini, a cousin of Naida’s, and Ivana, a younger sister.

All of the others remained with little Elana.

While they climbed spiral stairs, Naida explained that the chamber they had just left was used by the Duca as a place in which he prayed before and after contacts with caciques or subjects. A sort of halfway station between earth and heaven, as it were, where the Duca might be purged of any sully influence gained from human relationships.

At thought of the rank, egotistical hypocrisy implied by the story, Kirby smiled grimly. Then they came to a new door, heavier than that which barricaded the prayer chamber. Unlocked, the thing swung ponderously at Kirby’s push, and with the three girls pressing close beside him, he entered—and stopped.

“Naida!” he gasped.

“Oh, *oh!*” she cried, and while Nini and Ivana gasped, she clapped her hands in an instinctive, feminine reaction of joy. “But there are things here which I believe none but the Ducas of our race have ever seen! Oh! Why, the sacred girdle is as nothing compared to this display!”

By “display” she meant a treasure which took Kirby’s breath away, which made his heart act queerly.

The walls of the chamber were fashioned of polished blocks of obsidion on which stood out in heavy bas-relief a maze of decorative figures fashioned of pure, beaten gold—the same kind of gold which had gone into the making of the cylinder of gold. With his first glance at the gorgeously wrought motifs of Feathered Serpent and Sun and Moon symbols, Kirby knew to a certainty whence the golden cylinder had come originally.

But even the gold—literally tons of it there must have been—was nothing compared to the gems.

They were spread out in blinding array upon a great table in the center of the room. There were pearls as big as turkey eggs and whiter, softer than the light of a June morning growing in the East. There were rubies. One amongst the many was the size of a baseball and glowed like the heart of a red star. The least of the two or three hundred gems would have outclassed the greatest treasures of the Crown jewels of England and Russia combined.

Most overwhelming of all, however, was the jewel which rested against a square of black cloth all its own in the center of the table. While his heart still acted queerly, while Naida, Nini, and Ivana hung back, delighted, but still too bewildered to move, Kirby advanced and took gingerly in his hands a single white diamond about eighteen inches long, and almost as wide and deep as it was long.

The thing was carved with exquisite cunning to a likeness of the living head of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent.

Kirby dared not guess how many pounds the carved hunk of flashing, blue-white carbon weighed. He knew only that like it there was no other diamond in the world, and that the thing was real. Naida and the two girls were silent now, and suddenly Kirby realized that to their awe of the gem was added awe of deepest religious nature. Slowly he put the diamond head of the Serpent back upon its square of cloth.

“We—we had heard that this thing existed,” Naida said presently, voice hushed, “but no one except the holy men of our race has ever beheld it.”

“But, what is it?” Kirby asked. “Whence came it?”

However, when Naida would have answered, he interrupted.

“But wait! Tell me as we go. We could stay here for the rest of our lives without much trouble, but we’ve got to cover the rest of the tower and get back to the others.”



It was after they had closed the door to the treasure room that Naida told him the story.

“There is not so much to tell,” she began. “The diamond itself is so gorgeous that it is hard to talk about. But here is the story. A great many ages ago one of the Ducas of our race found the diamond, decided to carve it into a perfect likeness of the head of the Serpent God. All of the craftsmen of the race helped him and when they were done, they took their image to Quetzalcoatl himself, and showed him what they had done.

“Quetzalcoatl was pleased. So pleased, that he promised all of the wise men that he would cease to prey upon them as he had in the past, and henceforward would take his toll of sacrifice from the ape-men alone. Then he hated and would continue to hate because they worshipped not him but Xlotli.

“And so it came about,” Naida went on slowly, looking up at Kirby as they still mounted wide steps to the upper reaches of the tower, “that our people gained immunity from a God which had always before

harmed and destroyed them. Our race presently began to build this castle here on the high plateau, and Quetzalcoatl kept his compact with them. He still comes out of his chasm at intervals and preys upon the ape-men, but no one of our race has seen him for thousands of years, and he has always let us alone. And there is the whole myth and explanation of why the great diamond is revered among us as a holy of holies."

They had mounted to a new door which Kirby guessed might give entrance to the Duca's living quarters. But he was in no mood to open it at once.

"Wait a minute," he said as they all paused. "You say that, although none of your race has seen Quetzalcoatl since the diamond head was carved, he still comes out of his chasm and makes trouble for the ape-men. Just what does that mean?"

"Why—" Naida looked at him wonderingly. "I mean what I have said. The Serpent comes out of his chasm and—"

“What chasm?” Kirby asked sharply.

“Why, the one we crossed this morning. It extends to the far reaches of our country, beyond the Rorroh forest, where the ape-men dwell but which our people never visit. It is in that distant part of the chasm that the Serpent dwells.”

“But—but—Oh, good Lord!” Kirby whistled softly.

“Naida, do you mean to tell me that Quetzalcoatl was not simply a mythical monster, but an actual, living serpent which is alive *now*?”

Naida and the others shrugged.

“Why not?” she answered. “Sometimes we have captured a few ape-men, and they tell us stories of how Quetzalcoatl kills them. *They* say he is very much alive.”

“But,” Kirby mumbled in increasing wonder, “is this living creature the same which your ancestors worshipped first as long ago, perhaps, as a million years?”

“That,” Naida answered unhesitatingly, “I’m not sure of. Our caciques believe that the Serpent, although it lives longer than any other sentient thing, finally dies and is succeeded by a new Serpent which is reproduced by itself, within its own body.”

So overwhelming did Kirby find this unexpected sequel to their discovery of the great diamond head, so staggered was he by the fact that Quetzalcoatl, of Aztec myth, might exist as a sentient creature here in this cavern world, that he had little heart left for exploring other wonders.

Nevertheless, he presently pushed open the new door before which they had paused, and behind it found, as he had expected, the Duca’s living quarters.

These were as severe as the jewel chamber had been gorgeous. A thin pallet spread upon a frame of wood formed the bed, and beside it stood a single stiff chair. That was all. The walls of glistening obsidian were bare.

There was, however, a door in one circular wall, and as Kirby flung this open, his previous disappointment changed to delight. For shelves along the walls of the small chamber held roll after roll of parchment covered with script. And in one corner lay six undamaged, almost new Mannlichers and several hundred rounds of ammunition!

“Naida,” he exclaimed, “do you know what those are?”

“I suppose that they are weapons of the sort you used against the ape-men this morning?”

Kirby grinned.

“They are the same kind I used, and then some. With these weapons we can do what we never could with the smaller one. How did they get here?”

“They came when I was much younger,” Naida answered with a shade of sadness in her voice. “The men who had them penetrated the Valley of the Geyser, coming by a different route from the one you

followed. When the Duca learned they were there, he sent such men of the race as were still able to fight to kill them. That order of the Duca's was one of the first things to turn me against him. The men were not harming us, and they should have been permitted to go away. But the Duca insisted that they be killed, and in the fight were lost eight of our youngest and strongest men."

Kirby stooped to inspect the rifles.

"Has no one learned to use these weapons?"

"No," Naida answered. "The Duca kept them for himself."

"We think," put in Ivana, "that he hoped to learn to use them, and was afraid for us to have the knowledge."

Kirby filled one of the magazines, and felt the heft of the gun with pleasure.

“Very well,” he said. “It looks to me as though your time to learn the art of shooting has come at last. Come, I think we had better be getting back downstairs.”

Kirby took three guns himself, and with the others lugging the rest, they started back. The parchment rolls, he decided, must be left for examination later on.

They were all elated when they rejoined the girls in the prayer chamber, and high spirits were still further increased by the report, promptly given, that all had remained quiet in the amphitheatre. Save only for the presence of Elana, radiant and calm in death, the give and take of questions would have been accompanied by actual gaiety.

But the time of peace did not last much longer. While Naida was in the midst of answering incessant questions about the wonders of the jewel chamber, Kirby heard a sound from below, and suddenly went over to the downward-winding steps.

“Listen,” he called sharply back to the others.

He had not been mistaken. Many footsteps echoed from the amphitheatre, and he made out that the caciques were coming toward the bolted gate at the foot of the steps. While he listened, and Naida came eagerly to his side, silence fell.

But then clear words came up to them.

“Let the upper-world man come to the foot of the steps,” called the Duca. “I have an offer to make him!”



## Chapter 7

To himself Kirby chuckled. Such real entreaty filled the Duca's voice that there seemed no danger of further treachery from him at the moment.

With a grin, Kirby took Naida's hand and led her down the steps, unbolting each bronze gate but the last.

"What do you want?" he asked in a cool voice a moment later, when he stopped on the final step and faced the Duca from behind the protection of the final gate.

Clearly the parley was going to be a blunt one.

"I want you to leave our world," the Duca rumbled promptly.

He was drawn up in a posture intended to display dignity. But his left cheek, where Kirby had hammered him, was pulpy and discolored, and

somehow he seemed to Kirby more than ever merely human.

“Under what conditions am I to leave?”

“If you will vacate my tower at once,” the Duca said with a flush of eagerness which he could not conceal, “I will permit Naida and one of my caciques to escort you back to the Valley of the Geyser. I will also give you directions by which you may travel in safety from there to the outer world.”

Kirby, wanting more details, made himself seem thoughtful.

“And what will happen to me, and to the girls, if I decline?”

Encouraged, the Duca made an impressive gesture.

“You will be left in the tower to die of starvation. Mine is not a complicated offer. It should require no complicated decision. What is your answer?”

Kirby dropped his carefully assumed mask of thought.

“My answer is this,” he lashed out. “I will not leave! The tower is ours, and we will hold it until you have accepted Naida’s peace terms on your priestly oath!”

“But if you stay in the tower you will starve!”  
thundered the Duca.

“No, we won’t starve! We won’t starve because we eat the food of Ducas!”

In silence, Kirby took from his pocket a strip of the sacred Peyote and bit off one end of it. Suddenly the hush in the amphitheatre became complete. As he watched Kirby chewing, the Duca gasped and choked.

“Moreover,” Kirby announced with slow emphasis, “I have taken possession of the weapons which you took from men of the upper world, and which have already sent men of your race to their death. I have no wish to kill either you or your caciques, but if you do not presently discuss peace with me, you will certainly

find yourself embroiled in a struggle more bitter than the mild one of this morning.”

With that said, he swung on his heel, and taking Naida’s hand again, started with her up the steps.

“I have nothing more to say,” he called over his shoulder to a Duca whose white haired majesty had been stripped from him.

“We’re getting on,” he whispered to Naida a moment later. “The best thing for us is just to sit still now, and wait.”

With the questions he wanted to ask Naida about her world becoming insistent, he found himself, as a matter of fact, glad for the prospect of further respite. As both of them rejoined the girls in the Duca’s prayer chamber, the first thing he did was to take from his tunic the cylinder of gold which he had found in the canyon.

“What is this, Naida?” he asked, hoping to start talk that would make all of them forget the Duca and

politics, and at the same time help him to learn much that he wished to know.

But a queer thing happened. Naida's reaction to the carven gold was as unexpected as it was marked.

*"Oh!"* she cried in a voice which suddenly trembled with surprise, with blank dismay. Somehow, the cylinder of gold brought to her face things which not even the Serpent's head of the diamond had evoked.

The prospect of a long session of talk began to fade out in Kirby's mind.

"But Naida, whatever is there about this fragment of gold to startle you as it does?"

By this time all of the thirty-odd other girls had come flocking about them, and all were staring at the cylinder as fascinatedly as Naida.

"Do you see what he has there?" Naida finally asked, ignoring Kirby in her continued excitement.

“Do we *see*?” answered the girl she had addressed.

“Naida, surely it is the carving which was lost!”

Naida was quivering with feeling now.

“Do you realize what it means to our cause that it should have been returned to us in this way?”

The girl to whom she had spoken, and the others, simply looked at her, but in one face after another presently dawned awe and joy.

Kirby stood still, puzzled and interested, until at last Naida was recovered enough to speak to him.

“Where did you get this thing which you call ‘a fragment of gold’?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“I found it,” Kirby answered, “lying beside the skeleton of an upper-world man, while I was ascending the canyon which brought me to the Valley of the Geyser.”

“And you do not know what the cylinder is? But no, of course you could not.”

“*What* is it, Naida?”

Naida glanced at her friends, then laid her hand on Kirby’s.

“Next to the great diamond, it is the most cherished possession of our race. In some respects it is even more holy than the Serpent’s head. The cylinder happens to be the first work in gold which was ever produced by our people. It was made when the race was new. It was because our first wise men had found they could create things of beauty like this cylinder, that they decided to attempt the creation of the Serpent’s head, which is supposed to have brought all of our blessings upon us.”

Kirby thought he was beginning to understand the excitement which his introduction of the cylinder had created. He also thought he could see what Naida had meant by implying that the cylinder could be made to aid their cause.

“Tell me,” he asked in a mood approaching reverence, “how the cylinder came to be lying beside a dead man’s bones.”

“It was stolen,” Naida answered in the breathless silence which the others were keeping. “When I was very young, an upper-world man found his way here, and the Duca captured and meant to sacrifice him. But while they were leading him to the temple where such special ceremonies are held—the building stands on another plateau, beyond this—the man broke away. Some of the priests in the procession were carrying the cylinder, for it was an occasion of great importance. The prisoner knocked them down, got the cylinder away from them, and finally escaped by the same route over which you came.”

“And he escaped,” said Kirby wonderingly, “only to be killed by a rattlesnake before he ever reached the civilized world. But do you mean that you never knew your sacred cylinder was so close to you all these years?”

Naida shook her head.



“We never got to the canyon of which you speak, for a special reason which I shall explain some day. And besides that, I think the Duca was afraid of this man who fought so bravely. So he counted the cylinder as lost. And that is one of the reasons why he killed the men with the rifles, who appeared in the Valley a few years later.”

Kirby looked at her thoughtfully. The mood for discussing all the wonders of this lower world, which had made him bring out the cylinder originally, had quite vanished.

“I suppose,” he said, “that anyone who was responsible for the return of the cylinder to its rightful owners, would be held in some respect?”

Naida nodded vigorously, while little lightnings of excitement flickered in her eyes.

“He might be held in more than respect.”

“What, then, do you suggest that we do next?”

Again the small lightnings darted, and Naida reached for the cylinder.

“Do you mind if I take it for a moment?”

“Of course not.”

Promptly then she faced around.

“Wait here, everyone,” she ordered.

And with that she waved the cylinder in a flashing little arc before their eyes, and darted to the door.

It was all so unexpected that she was gone before Kirby could speak. Slowly, with all of the suddenly gay company of girls following after him, he went to the doorway, and stood on the steps leading to the amphitheatre.

A minute passed. He heard voices downstairs. He heard Naida’s voice ringing clearly, though he could not distinguish her words. He heard a great cry from a score of male throats. More minutes passed. Words

that were low and tense poured out in a rumbling volume. Above the rumble, Naida's voice presently sounded again, clear and sweet, but incisive. Then, when no more than five or six minutes had gone, Kirby heard the clang of the bronze gate at the foot of the steps, heard light, swift footsteps ascending.

"Naida!" he called softly.

She flashed upward toward him around the last curve in the stairway. Straight to his outstretched arms she went.

"It is done! It is done!" she whispered.

"Tell us!" cried first one girl and then others.

Naida drew away from Kirby at last.

"I told the Duca," she said to all of them, "that our leader would keep the cylinder for a period of time equal to one upper-world year. If the Duca grants all the terms of peace which we will ask of him, and if he accepts the upper-world man as our temporal ruler,

and all goes well for a year, then we will consider replacing the cylinder where it belongs.”

“And what,” Kirby asked exultantly, “does the Duca say?”

Suddenly, without warning, Naida dropped before him on one knee, and from that position gazed up at him laughing.

“He says he will make you our King, to govern all temporal affairs within our realm! He is waiting for you to come and hold a conclave now.”

*“What?”*

Still kneeling half in fun, half in sincere reverence, Naida held out the precious, potent cylinder of gold.

“Guard it carefully!” she exclaimed. “So long as you keep it away from the Duca, making him hope to win it back, he will consent to almost anything. Yes, he is waiting with the caciques in the amphitheatre now; waiting to draw up terms of peace.”



## Chapter 8

To be King amongst these people! A queer sensation tugged at Kirby's heart as he descended the steps with Naida at his right, and all of her—and his—dainty and gracious friends following after. Yet, intense as his emotion was, never for a second was he able to doubt the evidence of his senses which told him that all of this was real. As they descended the black steps of the tower, Naida's sweetness, her grace, the warm humanity of her, made him humble with gratitude for the extraordinary fortune which had come to him, an unromantic aviator born in Kansas.

Then they were standing in the brilliant light of the amphitheatre, and the Duca, surrounded by his caciques, was advancing to meet them.

It was not a long conference which followed. Kirby saw from the start that the Duca was indeed ready to come to terms. So treasured an object, it seemed, was the cylinder of gold, that the mere fact that Kirby possessed it made the Duca respect the possessor,

whether he would or no. With this initial advantage, it did not take long to make demands and win acceptance.

It was agreed that some systematic campaign of extermination should be planned and carried out against the ape-men. Further, the project for eventually bringing other upper-world men to the realm was accepted. Most notable of all, it was agreed that while the Duca should retain a voice in the regulation of temporal affairs, Kirby should possess an absolute veto over his word.

Naida said there must be some formal ceremony to celebrate Kirby's ascendancy to power. To this the Duca consented, and established the date as a fortnight hence, and the place as the temple on the plateau beyond the plateau of the castle, where the Ducas had been invested with their robes of state from time immemorial. At the end, it was decided that little Elana should be left in the prayer chamber until a burial ceremony could be held on the morrow.

In less than an hour, Kirby, Naida, and the others withdrew from the amphitheatre to return to the regular dwelling places of the girls. Deep in his mind, Kirby did not know how sincere the Duca was, and fear lingered, somehow, but he put it aside for the present.

As they came out of the castle, proceeding in a gay procession across the drawbridge above the moat of beautiful aquatic plants, Kirby saw that the light from the glass sky was fading to a glow like that of spring twilight in the upper world. Naida answered his question about the phenomenon by saying that day and night in the cavern corresponded to the same period above. What quality of the glass sky gave out light, she did not know, but it seemed definite that the element was sensitive to the presence of light in the upper world, and when the sun sank there, the glow faded here.

A flower embroidered path led them around the castle to a group of little crystalline houses all overgrown with bougainvillea vines and honeysuckle. In front of



the first, Naida paused, and while the others went on to the other houses, she looked at Kirby.

“It is Elana’s dwelling,” she said simply, “and it will be vacant now. Elana would want you to take it. Will you, please?”

The twilight was deepening swiftly. Kirby nodded reverently, then drew close to Naida.

“Naida?”

“Yes?”

He took her hand.

“I can stay here, I can consent to become, after a fashion, a King, only if you will reign with me as Queen. Will you, Naida? Will you love me as I have learned to love you during this single day in Paradise?”

She did not answer. But presently Kirby's mind went blank for sheer joy. For then Naida raised her face, and he kissed her lips.

It made no difference then that, despite the day's victory, Kirby could see trouble ahead, and feared, rather than rejoiced at, the Duca's too easy acceptance of terms. The future could take care of itself. This moment in the dusk belonged to him and Naida.

The two weeks which passed for Kirby after that particular twilight sped quickly. During the first morning, all attended the ceremony which was held for Elana's burial in the plot of garden ground where lay her ancestors. Ensuing mornings were devoted to conferences in the amphitheatre with Duca and caciques.

After the fourth day Kirby, at Naida's insistence, moved into splendid quarters in the castle—a suite of chambers across the amphitheatre from those in which the caciques dwelt. In practically forcing the move on Kirby, Naida won his consent finally by

agreeing to have their wedding ceremony performed on the day of his coronation; then she would come to the castle with him.

The afternoons of that first fortnight before the wedding and coronation were spent in hunting and fishing. Also Kirby and Naida visited often the aged people of the race, who dwelt in crystalline, vine covered houses like those of the girls, but removed from them. Naida's relatives were dead, but she had relatives there, and to all these aged ones, who sat living in the past, she did what she could to explain present developments in the affairs of the younger generation.

Last but not least, Kirby set aside certain hours each afternoon which he devoted to the formation of a rifle squad amongst the girls. Six rifles he had, and in turn he trained each of the girls in their use, having set up a range at the foot of the plateau cliffs. The results he gained made him feel that the day would come soon enough when he would dare launch an offensive against the ape-people; and especially pleasing was the sense of power over the Duca which he gained.

The Duca showed no sign of treachery. Yet Kirby did not trust him. Never did he quite forget the misgivings which had lingered in his mind after the first conclave.

As for his relationship with Naida, that grew with every moment they could steal to spend with each other. And side by side with their growing knowledge of each other grew, for Kirby, an increasing store of knowledge of the realm.

He learned, amongst other things, what seemed the origin of the worship of the Serpent, Quetzalcoatl, amongst primitive Mexican races. The time had been when the People of the Temple had mingled freely with the races above them; and, that they might have ready means of egress to the world, they had built the tunnel through which Kirby had entered the Valley of the Geyser. Thus, going and coming as they did, they had spread their cult of the worship of Quetzalcoatl; and when, eventually, strife arose between the peoples of upper world and lower, and the People of the Temple withdrew to their realm, they left behind

them the Serpent myth which was to live through countless centuries.

The tunnel, Naida said, had been abandoned when her people left the upper world once and for all, and its use for any reason prohibited. This, Naida gave as the reason why none of them went near the tunnel now, and why the cylinder of gold had lain in the canyon undiscovered. It was the explanation she had promised on the day in the tower, when first she saw the cylinder.

So the days passed, until the day set aside for wedding and coronation dawned. On that morning, Kirby, having concluded a long conference with the Duca, was walking with Naida in the gardens outside the castle.

“Tell me,” he said to her: “do you yourself believe that this Serpent has the powers of a God?”

Naida looked at him quickly, a sudden fright in her eyes.

“I believe the Serpent exists to-day, somewhere in the distant reaches of the chasm, beyond the Rorroh forest.”

“Yes, but do you believe the Serpent is God?”

Actually frightened now, she looked swiftly about. But when she saw that they were alone, confidence returned.

“No!” she exclaimed. “I do not believe Quetzalcoatl is a god. I believe he is the most terrible creature anywhere in our realm, and that men first worshipped him through fear. I believe our race would be better a hundred times if they had never made him their God.”

Kirby whistled.

“Then you do *not* believe that the Ducas of past ages talked with him. You do not believe it was Quetzalcoatl’s pleasure over the great diamond which made him cease preying on your people?”

“No! Long habit makes me show respect for these myths, and adhere to the customs of our cult, but I do not believe. I think our race gained immunity for the Serpent’s ravages, not through a compact with Quetzalcoatl, but because our builders were intelligent enough to erect the castle up here on the plateau, where Quetzalcoatl could not reach them. To tell the truth, I think the whole cult is false and wrong, and I wish Quetzalcoatl were dead and gone from the world!”

Kirby smiled. In spite of Naida’s reverence for certain features of the cult, he had long suspected that her true feelings were those she had just expressed. And he was glad for this new bond of understanding between them. He glanced at her with understanding and perfect trust.

“Naida, since we have talked so frankly, there is one more thing which I must bring out.”

She looked up at him.

“What is it?”

“The Duca.”

She drew closer, her perfumed body brushing his, her great eyes caressing him.

“Naida, I am afraid of the man.”

“And so am I!” she confessed suddenly.

“It has all been too easy,” Kirby said in a slow voice.

“There is no doubt whatever that our possession of the cylinder of gold has had great influence on the Duca, and yet—”

He paused, taking her hand.

“And yet,” she went on for him, “you do not believe he would have conceded what he has, unless he intends to make trouble?”

Kirby nodded twice, emphatically.

“Well, you have trained all of us to use the rifles.”

He smiled gravely at her understanding.



“Yes, I have. And your skill, and that of the others, with the rifles, will always help us. Yet even so—”

Closer still she drew now, and there was sadness in her eyes.

“I think I see,” she said in a voice which choked. “When do you think he will make a move to start trouble?”

Kirby hesitated, then drew a long breath.

“To-day!”

“On—on the day of our union?” Naida echoed in dismay. “Can you tell where or how he will strike at us?”

Kirby shook his head.

“There are a hundred things he could do. Naida, I—I—Well, somehow I am afraid of the ceremony this afternoon—the wedding ceremony!”

He felt a little shiver go through her, and would have taken her in his arms, save that a gay cry rang in the garden then.

“Naida, Naida!” It was her cousin, Nini, a bronze-haired youngster as elfin and Pucklike as her name. “I thought we should never find you! Do you realize this is your *wedding* day, and that you’re acting as if there was nothing to be done?”

Nini darted a mocking glance at Kirby, who grinned.

“Do come, Naida!” cried another girl. “Your gown is ready, and we want you to ourselves for awhile.”

Other girls joined them, some singing and some carrying an obligato on the sweet, flutelike instruments which Kirby had first heard as he hung in the throat of the geyser. In front of them all, Kirby laughed and kissed Naida on the forehead. But as he took leave of her thus, he whispered:

“We must not let our guard relax for a second this afternoon. And I think there is a more definite precaution which I will take, besides.”

## Chapter 9

Some hours later, Kirby smiled with tight-lipped satisfaction at thought of that precaution which he had taken. What it was only he, Nini, Ivana, and three other girls knew, which secrecy pleased him as much as the precautionary measure itself.

Seated alone in a dimly-lighted, thick-walled cell of the ancient temple in which the dual ceremony of wedding and coronation would take place, he was waiting for the moment when the festivities would begin. Thus far the Duca had done nothing. Yet Kirby's uneasiness would not leave him, and he continued to be thankful that, if trouble should start, the Duca might not find as many trumps in his hand as he expected.

A couple of hours after Kirby had left Naida and the other girls in the garden, all had begun the two-mile journey from the castle to the small plateau on which stood this temple, where the ceremony would be held. Now, while Kirby waited alone, the Duca and his caciques had gone to another wing of the temple.

Naida, attended by her bridesmaids, had been assigned to a cell of their own, and the rest of the girls were waiting in the nave of the temple. Unable to attend the walk from their plateau to this, the old people of the race had remained in their crystal houses.

With ten minutes more to wait, Kirby rose from a bench on which he had been seated, and began to pace his cell. It was this archaic pile of stone, he finally decided, which was causing his depression. Unlike the bright and cheerful castle, this place, older than any other building in the realm, was squat, thick-walled, and gloomy. Here, in the dusky cells which lined labyrinthine corridors, the early generations of the race had found protection from outside dangers. All of which was all right, Kirby thought, but just the same he wished he had insisted upon being wedded in the brilliant and cheerful amphitheatre.

But presently he stopped pacing and faced the door of his cell. Then he breathed a sigh of relief.

From down the twisting corridors which wound out to the central nave, stole the high sweetness of soprano voices, the whisper of flutes, and the mellow resonance of little gongs of jade and gold. It was the signal for which he had waited.

It had been the Duca's instructions that he should come out into the temple when the music began, and meet Naida there. Both would advance to the altar, and when they were in place, the Duca would come to them. Kirby, therefore, after a glance at the blue trousers and tunic of tanager scarlet which the girls had made for him, opened the door of his cell, and stepped out.

In a moment he traversed the windings of the corridor, and halted under a flat arch at one side of the temple nave.

As he paused so, to await the appearance of Naida and her bridesmaids under a similar arch directly across the temple, he held his breath. Not even nymphs could be as graceful as were the twenty-six girls who were performing the dance of Life

Immortal, which tradition decreed should be given before the ceremony by which, in this realm, two souls were wedded. The flash of rainbow gowns was like the swirling of light in a sky at dawning. The music of voices, flutes, and the little gongs of jade, would have stirred the souls of the dead.

If only the confounded sense of approaching disaster would leave him, Kirby thought grimly, this would be a magnificent moment. As it was, he turned his eyes away from the girls, and began to examine the temple.

Just as Naida had told him the case would be, he found both sides of the nave surrounded by arches similar to the one under which he was standing. Everywhere, dim and tortuous corridors led to cells like the one he had just left. Then, in one end of the nave, loomed a closed door from behind which the Duca and caciques would appear when the couple to be wedded were in place, before the altar.

The altar itself, a rectangular mass of some jadelike stone, stood at a distance of perhaps twenty paces in

front of the closed door. On top of the greenish stones, resting on a cushion of some crimson material, flashed the crown which would be used at the coronation. Kirby's eyes widened as he beheld a single rose-cut diamond two inches in diameter, mounted in an exquisitely simple bandeau of wrought gold. But, a moment later, even the crown which would be his—if nothing happened—seemed only a bauble compared to the other prize which he had won in this world beneath the world.

Naida!

He realized that the dance was ended, the music stilled, and that the rainbow garbed girls had formed a double line in the center of the temple. Suddenly his heart beat fast, and for just a moment, as he dared look full and deeply at Naida, and she smiled back at him across the distance, he even forgot to be depressed.

But even as he advanced to meet her, his uneasiness returned.



Now the girls were singing again, their voices raised in a triumphant chorale as beautiful as Naida's face with its warm red lips and smiling eyes, as beautiful as her wedding gown that might have been woven, in its filminess, of mist from the sea. The bridesmaids, silent, their lovely faces alight, paused. But Naida came on.

From her floated to Kirby a fragrance more overwhelming than even the perfume of the geyser. Presently he felt her hand on his arm, and at last they stood side by side. Now again, his premonition of evil left him for a flash; but again it returned.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love *you*."

"But I am still afraid."

Naida's smile faded.

"And I too. Oh, I've been terribly afraid! We will keep our guard!"

“Yes.”

In front of them, on the altar, the crown diamond winked and shimmered in a dim light. The swelling chorus of triumph, in which the bridesmaids had joined now, made the whole temple ring. Slowly, while Naida moved easily beside him, Kirby began to march to the altar.

Then it was done, and they were halted. After both of them had given a lingering glance at the crown whose diamond shimmered now within their reach, they raised their eyes to the closed door behind the altar.

The thing was swinging open. An inch it moved, two inches.

Kirby waited, never taking his eyes away from the widening crack. With a crashing final volume of sound, the chorus swept magnificently to its climax. Then the door was flung wide.

Still Kirby stood stiffly before the altar, with Naida drawn up splendidly beside him. After two seconds, however, he moved.

Duca and caciques were not standing in the corridor.

In the semi-darkness, the only figures visible there were squatting, grotesque things whose bodies were covered with whitish hair and whose leathery faces were disfigured by gashes of mouths filled with enormous teeth.

A feeling of standing face to face with final disaster, turned Kirby sick. As he jerked back from the altar, sweeping a paralyzed Naida with him, the ape-men let out gibbering howls, half-human. With gigantic, hopping strides, the foremost rank of the creatures swung forward, straight into the temple.

## Chapter 10

Kirby, already falling back toward the other girls, caught Naida up in his arms, and ran.

“Nini!” he bellowed. “Ivana! Get the rifles!”

While the two whom he had ordered sprang to a corridor, and four others followed, Kirby fell in with the others and dropped Naida on her feet. Sick as he was, there was still a ray of hope, because the hard-headed precaution he had taken against treachery this morning was to have Nini and Ivana bring the rifles here and hide them.

The first of the ape-men, snarling, laughing, had hopped beyond the altar, and the yellow foam of madness was slaverling from his jaws. Over his shoulder he howled some jargon which made his hairy legion struggle to catch up with him.

“Have you got any puff balls?” Kirby snapped at Naida.

She shook her head numbly, just as Nini and Ivana swung forward with the Mannlichers.

“No. But you had sense enough to bring the rifles! Oh, what does it mean?”

“The Duca has sold himself out to the ape-man! He was helpless against us, and has brought them to destroy us for him. Here, Ivana, give me a rifle! Everyone for herself!”

The next moment he had a Mannlicher at his shoulder.

As the thing kicked, an ape who would have reached him in two more jumps crashed over with his heart torn out, the temple echoed with sound which threatened to rip its solid walls apart, and bright flashes at Kirby's right and left told him that other rifles were getting under way.

He fired again, twice more, slaughtering an ape with each shot. The five other rifles were creating havoc.

Blocked by a dozen torn and bleeding bodies on the floor, the reenforcements which still poured from the corridor, began to mill around amongst themselves, and the forward charge slowed down. All the panic which had sent the ape-men scuttling from the beach at their first experience of gunfire, seemed ready to break loose again now.

Kirby felt it was good enough for the work of a minute.

“Get into line as I showed you how!” he shouted.  
“Rifles in the front rank, the others behind them.  
We’re all right now! Keep firing!”

“Keep behind me!” he ordered Naida, still unarmed.

Then he placed a shell in the chest of one brute who was broader and heavier than the others—a leader—and saw that he had increased the demoralization; and from the hastily-formed front rank a volley leaped hot and jagged.

Then the rout which had threatened broke loose. As eight ape-men slumped into blubbering, bleeding heaps, the milling remainder of the horde turned, and in a fighting, scrambling frenzy attempted to get back to the corridor.

Kirby let his triumph take the form of thoughts about what he would do to the Duca when that personage could be rounded up.

“Follow after them!” he ordered. “Don’t stop until we have located the Duca. He is the one we must settle —”

But he never finished.

As he himself, holding fire for a second, prepared to follow up the retreat, he found himself confronted by the utterly unexpected.

A voice unquestionably the Duca’s began to shout orders at the ape-men from somewhere down the corridor! And, riot or no riot, the tones of that voice

seemed to inspire the creatures with more fear than the rifle fire.

So suddenly the change came, that by the time Kirby flung his rifle again to his shoulder, the crazy retreat had been halted, and as he fired again, the ape-men swung in their tracks and began to charge!

There was no time to guess by what power the Duca had turned the tables. There was not even time for orders. Kirby fired twice, knowing that the ape-men had been infused with some spirit which would bring them on in spite of rifle fire.

Naida, unarmed, cried out behind him, and he shoved his gun at her.

“Take it!”

He had just inserted a new clip. He handed her others.

“Fire for your lives!” he shouted to the girls.



“But you!” Naida gasped. “You are unarmed!”

“I’ll be all right.”

On the floor lay a jagged, hand-chipped knife of obsidian which had fallen as some ape died. Kirby grabbed it.

In another second the flood of ape-men had burst in all its fury over him. Crashing, thundering shots were dinning in his ears, animal death screams and the Valkyrie battle cries of the girls filled the temple. He could not tell how many of the apes were fighting him. As a cave-man’s club whizzed past his head, he drove his knife once, and yanked it dripping from hairy, yielding flesh to plunge it again. A sudden side-step carried him away from another assailant. He dropped the knife to snatch the gigantic club of one of the creatures he had killed.

Quicker in every movement than the ape-men, he laid on, right and left, with such power that blood spurted in a dozen places, and heads were split open on every side. And because of his speed, the frantic, clumsy

blows and knife thrusts which were directed at him proved harmless.

A terrific drive which smashed a snarling face into pulp, left Kirby free for a second, and he emerged from the first round of battle ready to cut in and help the girls. But then he saw that he had gotten separated from the main body.

“Naida!” he called. “Naida!”

A series of shots answered him, and as several apes fell, a gap was opened through which he saw her conducting a well ordered retreat of all the girls toward the dark corridors surrounding the temple. Again Kirby fell to with his club, swinging, hacking, fighting with his whole strength to catch up. He made headway, and hope began to come again. The ape-men would not kill, or even harm, the girls. What they wanted was to carry them off. If he and Naida together could get their party rounded up in the corridors, the chances were good.

“Naida!” he shouted again. “Coming!”

Battering down an ape in front of him, he jumped up on the corpse, and saw that already the vanguard of girls had reached the first sheltering corridor. Naida had been cut off from the others by eight or ten apes. But even so her fire made her mistress of the situation, and she seemed all right.

It was just as Kirby started to jump down from the corpse that he saw something which put another complexion on the matter, and left him frozen where he was.

Behind Naida, directly in the path in which her slaving aggressors were slowly forcing her, a huge stone slab in the temple floor had begun to tilt up as if it were a trapdoor raised by an invisible hand. Within the yawning opening, Kirby caught a glimpse of stone steps winding down into blackness.

In a flash he saw that it was Naida, and her alone, that the ape-men were after. The Duca's determination was to capture her, and it was the presence of this trapdoor, making capture possible, which had brought on the second charge of the apes.

A scream, high and wild, from Naida released Kirby from his trance of horror. He leaped off the corpse, and smashed a suddenly presented skull like an egg shell. Momentarily he saw Naida, too terrified to fire, staring at the open trapdoor. Kirby felled two apes and felt their blood on his arms.

“Ivana!” he yelled. “Help Naida, for God’s sake!”

An answering shout, not from Ivana alone but from many girls, encouraged him, and he swung his club with a speed and force which would let nothing stand before him. But then another scream from Naida rang in his ears.

“Naida!” he shouted. “It’s all right! We’re coming!”

He knew, though, that it *wasn’t* all right. Fighting like a maniac, he opened another lane down which he glimpsed her. Fighting still, in a last terrific effort to force his way down the lane to her side, he saw the black opening gape at her feet; and, as Naida screamed again, a dozen hairy arms reached it at

once, twisted the empty rifle out of her hands, and lifted her shining body as if it had been a feather.

Shouts and murderous fire were coming from the other girls, and Kirby swung his club as never before. But even as he fell upon the last two or three apes which kept him away from Naida, those who had snatched her, bolted down the steps.

Kirby was left with the memory of Naida's great eyes fixed upon his, fear-filled, beseeching his protection. In a second, the ponderous trapdoor crashed into place, and she was gone.

## Chapter 11

Dazed and grief-stricken, Kirby stood in the bloody, corpse-filled nave of the temple, surrounded by thirty-two girls whose faces were blanched and most of whose eyes were tear-bright. The fight was over, and they were assembled to decide what must be done, but for a time no one spoke.

Gaining the trapdoor just as it was pinioned from beneath, Kirby had torn at it with bare hands. But that had been hopeless. Then he had begun to fight again. But that had been hopeless also. With howls and screams they started to retreat, and it had not taken Kirby long to find out that every part of their raid had been carefully planned, even to this retreat under fire. Straight into the damp black tunnel which led away from the corridor behind the altar, the apemen had leaped. And Kirby, in hot pursuit, had heard the Duca's voice driving them on. Too much the soldier to follow in that darkness where the Duca knew every foot of the way, and he knew nothing, Kirby had seen that he must go back to the girls and take stock.

Now he looked at the strewn ape corpses, smelled the corrosive reek of burned powder, and tried to put aside his grief.

“The Duca,” he said at last, “must have been planning this with the apes ever since the first morning in the castle.”

Ivana, Naida’s sister, nodded.

“The Duca brought the ape-people here, kept them in the tunnel, and then herded them back when their work was done. I suppose it was one of the caciques who opened the door when the time was right.”

“Does anyone think we ought to try the tunnels now?” Kirby asked.

Several girls shook their heads. He knew that already they felt he had been wise in giving up the pursuit. Ivana spoke.

“If the Duca and his horde stay underground, we shouldn’t have a chance against them. And if they don’t, we’re better here.”

Kirby shot a searching glance at her, somehow sure that her thoughts were running parallel with his.

“You don’t think they’re going to stay here, do you?”

“No, and you don’t either,” Ivana answered.

“It seems to me that they will retreat into the Rorroh as fast as they can,” Kirby then observed.

“And do you think the Duca and all the caciques will go with the apes?” This time it was Nini who spoke, and with the council so well launched, Kirby began to feel better.

“I think,” he answered Nini, “that the Duca has gone over to Xlotli altogether. We fooled him to-day. Instead of killing or capturing us all, he—he only got Naida. But he won’t give up. I think he is taking the apes off to some place from which he can launch a new attack.



And we've got to stop him before he is ready to deliver another blow."

"What do you mean?" Ivana now asked.

"Do you know where the villages of the ape-people are?"

"Yes. None of us has been very far into the Rorroh, but I could guess where some of the villages may stand."

Silence fell after that, but Kirby knew from the glint in Ivana's eyes, and the quick breaths which other girls drew, that they understood.

"Ivana," he said suddenly, "will you go with me into the Rorroh jungle, and stay with me, facing down every danger it may conceal, until we have found Naida and brought her back?"

A flush of life crept into Ivana's pallid cheeks.

"Yes!"

Kirby faced the other girls, all of them keyed up now.

“Nini, will you go?”

Nini, bronze-haired, dainty nymph of a girl, who had yet the stamina of a man, looked at him with brave eyes. Then her hands tightened on her rifle, and she stepped forward.

“When will you have us start?” Ivana asked in a low voice.

“Now!” Kirby answered, and, taking up the rifle which lay beside him—the same with which Naida had fought—he looked at the other girls.

“There is not one of you,” he said slowly, “who would not go willingly on this quest. But the pursuit party must be small and mobile. And there is another duty. To all of you I leave the care of the castle and the plateau. Take the three rifles I shall leave behind, do what you can to reassure the old people, and hold the plateau safe until we return.”

A murmur of girls' voices sounded in the temple. Kirby motioned to Nini and Ivana, and followed by a low cheer, they moved off together.

The night was on them, where they crouched in a cave above a swiftly flowing river. Kirby, rifle across his knees, sat peering out across the black, invisible stretches of the forest. His nostrils quivered to this mingled smells of fresh growth and fetid decay of the grotesque land. In his ears shrilled the creaking and scraping of insects, the flap of unseen wings, the distant bellowing grunt of some unseen, unknown animal.

"I cannot sleep," Ivana said presently, from back in the cave.

"Hush," he whispered, "you will wake Nini."

"But I am already awake!" came her answer. "I—I cannot forget the white snakes which slid from that tree when you tried to cut firewood."

“Hush,” Kirby murmured again. “Presently the moon will rise on the earth above, and light will come here. Even if the jungle is terrible, were you not born with courage? Go to sleep now, both of you, because you must relieve me soon.”

As silence fell again, he knew that the real thing behind their nervousness was their ghastly doubt about what the night was bringing to Naida. But none of them spoke of Naida. So sickening were the possibilities that Kirby would not permit conjecture to occupy even his mind when, at length, the sound of even breathing told him that Nini and Ivana slept.

After dreary passing of an hour, a faint light grew over the jungle, silver and clear, and Kirby let his mind run back to the two deserted ape-men communities which they had found and searched before dusk sent them to the cave. From the signs of hasty departure, it looked as though a far-reaching order had taken the brutes away from their dwellings, and sent them—somewhere.

That somewhere seemed likely to be the great central community which Ivana said was rumored to exist in the far reaches of the Rorroh. The problem was how to locate the community through the hideous country. But Kirby presently drove the question from his head. To-morrow's evils could best be faced when morrow dawned.

Enough light had grown now so that the swirling bosom of the river, and a strip of sand directly below the cliff in which their cave was set, were visible. As Kirby let his eyes wander to the lush growth beyond the sand, he heard something which made him stir uneasily. Some creature which suggested power and hugeness immeasurable was moving there.

The brush parted, and he saw plainly an animal with the bulk of a two-story house. On two feet the nightmare thing stood, as lightly as a cat, and then came down on all four feet as it ambled out on the sand and extended into the lapping river a tremendous beak studded with teeth. A smell of crushed weeds and the musty odor like that of a lion house filled the night. The tyranosaur—it was more

like a tyrannosaur than anything else—breathed heavily and guzzled in great mouthfuls of water.

Kirby sat perfectly still. He hoped the thing would go away. But the tyrannosaur did not go away. All at once it hissed loudly and stood up, its eyes glowing green and baleful, and Kirby leaned forward.

From the water was slithering another creature with a gigantic, quivering, jelly body. Kirby saw to his horror that, in addition to four short legs with webbed, claw-tipped feet, there sprouted from the body a number of octopus tentacles. From the scabrous mottle of the head, cruel, unintelligent, bestial eyes glared at the rearing tyrannosaur.

One of the serpentine tentacles whipped out, slapped against the tyrannosaur's fore-shoulder to call forth a hiss and a short bellow. Then other tentacles waved in the moonlight, and in a flash the tyrannosaur was enmeshed as by a score of slimy cables. He was not altogether helpless. Suddenly the steam shovel of a beak buried itself in the jelly body of the water animal, and there spurted out a flood of inky liquid.

The water animal emitted a sickening gurgle. But the tyrannosaur's advantage was only temporary. Closer and closer drew the ugly, scabrous tentacles. The tyrannosaur never had a chance. Its green eyes flared, the shovel beak plunged and slashed, but never for a second did the tentacles relax. As Kirby stared, he saw the water animal begin to back up, dragging its gigantic enemy with it. For a second the whole night was hideous with the sound of hisses, gurgles, dashing water. Then the river boiled once and for all, and both animals sank in its depths.

Kirby chafed cold hands together and shivered a little, then turned to see if Nini and Ivana had heard the struggle.

Fortunately, however, they still slept. And as if this peace which was upon them were an omen of good, the jungle continued quiet for the next hour. Kirby wakened them at last, and after a snatched nap, was in turn awakened.

The three of them started again when the first glimmerings of dawn came to the forest. Of food there

was plenty—fruits which grew in profusion, and some roots which Nini grubbed out of the earth. Having started along the first trail which they encountered beside the river bank, they ate as they walked.

Kirby judged they had kept their steady gait for more than two hours before a slight widening of the trail roused him from the preoccupation into which he had fallen.

“See there,” he exclaimed to both girls, and pointed at a grove of trees with fanlike leaves which towered up to the right of the trail. “What are those big bundles fastened to the lower limbs?”

Ivana glanced at Nini, who nodded as if in answer to a question.

“This must be one of the places where the ape-people leave their dead,” Nini answered. “The bundles—But come over to them.”

Kirby forced his way ahead until he stood beneath a huge, unsavory bundle wrapped in roughly woven



brown fibre, and wedged in a fork between two limbs. Judging from the ugly odor which overhung the grove, there could be no question about what the bundle contained. Nini and Ivana, glancing at the scores of similar bundles which burdened the trees of the whole grove, made wry faces. Kirby slung his rifle in the crook of his arm, and nodded toward the trail.

“There must be a village somewhere near,” he said.

A mile farther on they found what they were seeking, a colony of seventy or eighty conical dwellings of mud and thatch, which were ranged in a double circle about a central common of bare, well-trodden earth. It took no long reconnaissance to discover that the town was deserted completely of all inhabitants.

Ivana beckoned and darted to one of the nearest huts, and Kirby, following her, found lying on the uneven earth floor within, a half-skinned animal which resembled a small antelope. An obsidian knife beside the carcass, the disordered condition of a couch of grass, the sour odor of recent animal occupancy, all told their story.

“The owner left in a hurry,” Kirby observed aloud.

Nini, who had gone beyond, to a larger hut which might have belonged to a king ape, called out excitedly to them.

“A great number of apes have eaten a hurried meal here!”

Kirby entered the shadowed, foul-smelling interior of the central hut to find her statement true. Broken meats, some raw, some cooked, lay on the dirt floor, and scattered bits of fruit were mingled with them. The ashes of a burned out fire at the hut entrance were cold, but had not been for long.

“Do you think—” Ivana began.

“I think the whole of the Duca’s horde came this way, fed, and went on, taking everyone with them,” Kirby finished.

“But which direction did they take?” asked Nini, who was standing at the door of the big hut and had

already begun to examine the crowding, green, inscrutable walls of jungle which foamed up to the clearing on all sides.

No less than seven trails wound away into the dark country beyond, and Kirby saw that the question would not be an easy one.

Having hastily circled the clearing and peered down one trail after another without finding a clue, he knew that it was the Duca's intelligence which had made the ape-people depart without leaving even tracks behind them. He did not like the situation.

"Well," he rumbled to his companions, "we may as well take our choice. One chance in seven of coming out right!"

But the words were hardly out of his mouth before he pulled himself up with a jerk, and cursed himself for having given in.

"Ivana! Nini!" Sharpness, a sudden ring of hope edged his voice. "Am I seeing things, or is that—"

As he pointed to a huge aloe bush down one of the trails to their left, they started to run. Then Kirby knew that he was not seeing things. What his first inspection of the trails had failed to show, he saw plainly now.

Tied loosely to one branch of the aloe bush, almost concealed amidst the deep green of foliage, was a bit of white cloth! In a second Kirby was holding out to his companions a tiny strip of Naida's wedding gown.

"She knew we would come!" He stared down the trail with narrowed, keen eyes.

How Naida had contrived to leave her signal was more than they knew. The fact that she *had* done so, sent all three of them down the trail at driving speed.

An hour passed, then another, and the morning which had been barely born when they first took the trail, wore on to the sultriness and vast, colored light of a tropical noon. Twice the main trail forked, and twice they found an unobtrusive bit of cloth to guide them beyond the works. When the hands of Kirby's still

useful watch pointed to twelve, they paused to eat and rest. Then they pushed on.

Meanwhile, the country through which they passed left Kirby with a clear understanding of why Naida and her people had shunned the Rorroh forest down the centuries of time.

Just one thing which stuck in his head was the sight of a small creature like a marmoset, sticking an inquisitive nose into the heart of a sickly-sweet plant which resembled a terrestrial nepenthe. No sooner had the little pink snout touched the green and maroon splotched petals, than the plant writhed, closed its leaves, and swallowed the monkey whole. Little squeaks of agony and terror sounded for a moment, and ceased.

At midafternoon they paused in a spot where a forest of trees with whorled tops were slowly being strangled to death by immense orchids of every conceivable shape and color, and by a kind of creeping mistletoe which grew almost as they watched. Here also, the ground was covered with

fluffy, grey-green moss which seethed constantly as if it were a carpet of maggots. Both Ivana and Nini warned Kirby on his life not to touch or go near the moss, and a moment later he knew why.

From the forest came the flash of a small, five-toed horse being pursued by some animal with a hyena head that barked. At the edge of the mossy glade the hyena swerved aside, but the terrified horse plunged straight out on the carpet of moss. Instantly the air was filled with the sound of animal screams, and a series of tiny, muffled explosions. A cloud of greenish-red mist swirled about the horse. Quivering, still screaming, the animal went down on its knees, and as the reddish green smoke fell on him and settled, it became a mass of growing moss spores.

Before Kirby's eyes, the pitiful animal was covered by a shroud of green that spread over him and cloaked him, licking over all with tiny sounds like far off muffled drums as fresh spore cases developed and burst. The screams died. Even as Kirby drew the girls to him and they passed on, the horse's nostrils, eyes,

mouth were filled with choking green moss; and he lay still.

On and on, deeper into the jungle Kirby pushed, and never for a moment did his companions falter. But the way was not so easy now, for nerves were jaded, muscles sore, and no human will could have been powerful enough to cast aside the growing fear for Naida.

Fear came finally to a head when, toward dusk, Kirby sighted a fork ahead of them, approached it confidently to look for Naida's sign, and found nothing.

"Oh Lord!" he muttered, and realized that it was the first time any of them had spoken for long.

"There must be something to guide us!" Ivana exclaimed as she searched with questing eyes through the swiftly deepening gloom of evening.

Nini, making an effort to keep up hope in spite of the paleness which came to her lovely face, darted down

both paths, glancing as she went at every bush and shrub. But she returned in a moment, and as she shook her head, her great eyes were somber.

Kirby grunted, scratched behind his ear. Then, however, he stifled an exclamation, and clutched at the hands of both girls.

On one of the two trails appeared suddenly in the dusk an ape-creature. Kirby saw at once that the thing was small—a female undoubtedly—and that it had spied them and was moving toward them with all speed. And borne in upon him most certainly was the fact that the ape-woman was making signals of peace. In her outstretched hand flickered through the gloom a strip of cloth that was gauzy and white.

Again—a strip of Naida's gown.

"If you know any words of her tongue, call to her," Kirby said sharply.

Ivana obeyed. All three of them started forward. The ape-woman, after returning the hail in creaking



gutturals, came up to them, and with an unexpected look of pathos and entreaty in her face, began to address the girls with a flood of talk.

Word after creaking word she poured out while Nini and Ivana listened in silence. Finally Kirby could stand the suspense no longer.

“What is it, Ivana? What does she say? Your eyes are lighting up with hope! Tell me—”

Ivana smiled and turned toward him, while the ape-woman still looked her entreaty.

“She says,” Ivana announced bluntly, “that she and the other women amongst their people, do not want any of the girls of our race to be taken by their males. Already the men are quarreling about Naida. They will not look at their own women. Naida told this woman that we would be following, and sent her to lead us to the place where the ape-people are assembling!”

Kirby felt his lips tightening in a grim smile at the thought that jealousy was not unknown even to the semi-human creatures of this neither world. He looked at Nini and Ivana during a stretched out second. Then he moved.

“Good,” he snapped. “We go on at once.”

That was his only recognition of what was surely one of the important happenings of a lifetime. But for all that, his tired brain, which so lately had felt the chill of black depression, was suddenly set on fire with triumph and thanksgiving.

## Chapter 12

As they marched rapidly, the ape-woman, who called herself Gori, succeeded in making them understand that most of the ape-tribes, commanded by the Duca and his caciques, were assembled in the central community toward which they were heading, that grave danger of some sort threatened Naida, and that the need for haste was great. But what the danger was, the two girls could not understand.

“We can’t make out what is going to happen—what they plan to do to-night,” Ivana whispered at last to Kirby. “All Gori says is that we must rescue Naida and take her away, and must take the Duca away so that he cannot influence the men any more. And she keeps repeating that we must hurry.”

“And you can’t find out what we must rescue Naida *from*?”

Ivana shook her head.

“I’m afraid we’re facing something of an appalling nature, as dangerous to ourselves as to Naida. But I know nothing more.”

By the time the silver glow which corresponded to moonlight flooded the jungle, Gori had left the open trail, and was leading them across country which humans could not have negotiated without the guidance she offered. Advancing cautiously always, she stopped for long seconds at a time to reconnoitre, shifting her huge ears about and changing their shape, twitching her nostrils, and glancing hither and thither with bright little eyes. Sometimes they passed immense spike-tipped flowers ten feet in diameter, with fleshy yellow leaves which gave out a nauseating stench. Vines with long, recurved thorns and blossoms of deep scarlet, laced the undergrowth together and made passing dangerous. Fire-flies drifted past, and all above and about them flapped moths as big as bats.

Kirby, his clothes almost torn from his body, sweat pouring from every pore, heard the labored breathing of the girls, and wondered how they could hang on.

But they did, and after a long time, Gori, halting in the midst of a slight clearing, held up a warning hand.

A queer sensation came over Kirby. As he stared and listened, he realized that the twinkles he saw far ahead were not fire-flies, as he had thought, but lights. In the frosted moon glow, Nini and Ivana drew close, and Kirby clasped their hands and pressed them for a second. Too tired to exult further he was, even though they seemed close to their goal of goals.

Gori swung her hairy arm in a signal, and with rifles clasped carefully, they began to advance. When, five minutes later, they stood in the heart of a rank glade beyond which they could see nothing, Gori spoke to the two girls in her creaking whisper, and Nini laid a restraining hand on Kirby's.

"We have gone as far as Gori dares! She says we must climb a tree here, and watch what will go on in a clearing just beyond this thicket."

"And we still don't know what we're getting into," Kirby muttered.

But at any rate they had reached the end of their march.

Exultation did come to Kirby now, but still he was too completely fagged, as were both girls, to give much sign. Gori pointed to a tree some fifty feet away, which shot up to a great, foliage-crowned height. They moved toward it, and in a moment were climbing, Gori first, the girls after her, and Kirby last.

“Here we are,” Ivana presently whispered, at the same time drawing herself out on a limb just beneath one on which Gori and Nini had crawled.

Kirby found himself hedged in by tasselled leaves through which he could not see. The foliage thinned, however, and soon Ivana halted, perched herself in a comfortable position. Kirby, making himself at ease beside her, and seeing that Nini and Gori were in place, turned his eyes slowly, expectantly downward.

At first, all that he saw from his bird’s-eye perch, was a circular clearing two hundred yards across, which was surrounded on all sides by lowering jungle. In the

exact center of the circle, like a splotch of ink on gray paper, there gaped a deep hole which might have measured six feet in diameter. Around this hole, eight poles as tall and stout as telephone poles stood up in bristling array. The moonlight showed that the whitish earth of the clearing was tamped smooth as though thousands of creatures had danced or walked about there for centuries. But not a living form was visible.

A grunt of disappointment escaped Kirby after that one look. When he looked beyond the clearing, however, a change came to his feelings.

A quarter of a mile away, lights were twinkling—the same ones which had been visible on the last stretch of the journey. And the moonlight touched the little conical roofs of fully two hundred huts of the ape-people. No sound was audible save the souging of night wind in the trees, the shrilling of insects.

Nevertheless, there stole over Kirby all at once a feeling that the great ape-village was crowded to overflowing. What was more, he felt himself touched by an eery sensation—familiar these days—of evil to come.

Ivana, seated with her rifle across her knees, stirred on the limb beside him.

“Oh,” she whispered suddenly, “I am afraid of this place!”

Kirby took her hand.

“I know. Maybe it is the sensation of all the legions of the apes herded together so silently in their village. I wish we knew what to expect from them. I wish—”

But he broke off, and called softly to Nini on the limb above. She looked down with a drawn expression about her mouth.

“Are you all right?” Kirby whispered.

“Yes. But—Well, are both of *you* all right? Gori says we have reached here in time, but I—” A gasp of uneasiness escaped her, and Kirby heard Ivana echo it. “There is something about that black, silent hole out there in the clearing, and about those poles sticking up like fangs, that makes me terribly, terribly



afraid. Oh, what are they planning? Where is Naida? What are they going to do to her?”

Kirby whistled in a low key. He had not thought about the black hole in the clearing.

“Hum,” he muttered, “that’s interesting. Ivana, Nini, what do you suppose—”

But he got no answer. Gori’s twitching lips grimaced them to silence.

The next instant, the stillness of the night was hurled aside by a howling, gurgling shout from a hundred, a thousand hysterically distended ape throats. With the sickening sound came from the village the sullen roaring of drums.

Ten minutes later, a Kirby who was cold with apprehension and wonder looked down from his leaf-crowned height at such a spectacle as he knew human eyes had never before seen. The shouting had died away, the drums were silenced. Crammed into the clearing, their foul, hairy bodies packed close

together, the silver light glinting against rolling red eyes and grinning white teeth, stood fully a thousand apes!

Once the first tumult of shouting in the village had died, they had come on in silence, and in orderly procession. Those who bore the drums—huge gourds with heads of stretched skin—had formed a line entirely around the outer diameter of the circular clearing. Then others, lugging vats of a dark, heady-smelling liquor, had deposited their burden beside the drums, and formed a second circle. The balance of the thousand had crowded itself together as best it might, leaving bare the center of the clearing with its black hole and fangs of poles. Kirby, looking down at these legions, did not wonder that cold sweat wetted his back.

Capable of thinking about only one thing—Naida—he was trying with all his strength not to think. Ivana, her face blanched in the light which filtered their camouflage of leaves, sat rigid, her hands locked about her cold rifle. On the branch above, Nini and

Gori were as still as mummies. No one had spoken since the vanguard of apes had appeared.

But at last Nini leaned close to Kirby.

“Have you any idea of what all this means?”

A draught of hot night air carried up a stench of drunkenness, and the goatly odor of massed animal bodies.

“No,” Kirby whispered. “I suppose, from Gori’s having brought us here, that Naida is going to appear somehow. We’ve simply got to trust that Gori knows what she is about.”

“But listen—” Ivana suppressed a shudder. “Suppose they should bring Naida here presently to force her to take part in some ceremony at which we can only guess. Gori, who thinks we can work miracles, supposes we can rescue Naida. But I—I’m not so certain. Is there *anything* we can do?”

It was exactly that question which had made Kirby fight to keep himself from thinking. His face turned gray before he answered. But answer he did, finally.

“Yes, there is one thing we can do, Ivana. We’ve got to be frank with each other, and so far, this is the *only* thing I’ve been able to figure out. If Naida is brought here, and they make any move to harm her or torture her, we can, and we will, shoot her quickly, before harm or pain comes.”

A grim silence settled once more. During the last miles of march in the jungle, there had persisted in Kirby’s heart the hope that there would be at least *something* favorable in whatever situation they might encounter. His spirits were so low now that he dared not speak again.

Amongst the noiseless sea of ape-men below them came, every now and again, a little ripple of motion as some anthropoid shadow fell out of his place, approached the liquor vats, and swilled down the black brew, a quart at a gulp. But mostly there was

little commotion. Ivana drew a sibilant breath and said that she wished something would happen.

“I wish,” Kirby answered tensely, “that we knew *what* is going to happen.”

But the nightmare waiting was not to go on forever. Kirby leaned forward and pointed.

It was only instinct that had made him know action must come. For a second, no change in the expression of the ape-men, no movement in their crammed ranks, was visible. Then, however, a queer, subdued grunting rumbled deep down in many throats, and those who had faced the hundred-foot space in the center of the clearing squatted down on their hams.

In the back of the crowd necks were craned. The stronger shoved the weaker in an effort to get a better view of the cleared stage, and a few ape-men who had been drinking hurried on unsteady legs to their places.

“The drums!” Kirby whispered then.

With almost military precision, the scores of leather-faced creatures who had led the procession into the clearing, clasped the skin-headed gourds to their shaggy bellies, and stood with free arm raised as though awaiting a signal. Nini moved in her position, and Kirby felt Ivana shiver and edge close to him.

From the front rank of the crowd, there sprang up a great male creature with the face of a gargoyle and the body of a jungle giant. Just once he reeled on his feet, as though black alcohol had befuddled him, then he steadied himself, flung both arms above his head, and rolled out a command which burst upon Kirby's ears like thunder.

It was as if the whole cavern of the lower world, and the whole of the round earth itself, had been rocked uneasily, dreadfully by the bellowing, crashing explosion of the drums. Maddened by the turmoil he had let loose, the gargoyle-faced giant ape-man leered about him with blood-shot, drunken eyes, and beat on his cicatrized chest with massive fists. Suddenly he let out a bellow. Straight up into the air he sprang in a wild leap. When he came down, he was

dancing, and the portentous, the sickeningly mysterious ceremony for which such solemn preparation had been made, was begun.

Kirby drew a rasping breath. Knowing that there must be some definite reason for the dance having begun just when and as it had, he looked beyond the solitary dancing giant, on beyond the crowded legions of the apes, toward the village. There, where the main trail from the community approached the clearing, he saw precisely the thing which he had both hoped desperately and dreaded terribly to find.

Headed directly toward the clearing, moving down the trail with slow, majestic pace, came a procession headed by a bodyguard of ape-men and augmented by other men whose nakedness was covered by unmistakable, unforgettable priestly robes of gray.

All at once the ape-people in the clearing began to scuffle apart, opening a lane down which the procession might pass to the central stage with its dancer, its ink spot orifice, and its fangs of tall poles. Kirby, watching the congregation, watching the

majestic approach of gray robes through the night, wiped away from his forehead a sweat of fear.

“I think,” Nini called in a voice pitched high to outsound the drums, “that the—the Duca is with them!”

“Yes.” Kirby pointed jerkily. “In the middle of the procession, there, surrounded by his caciques!”

The Duca!

Yet his approach did not hold Kirby. Directly behind the priests were emerging now from the jungle a new company of ape-men. Squinting his eyes, Kirby saw that two of them were lugging on a pole across their shoulders a curious burden—a sort of monstrous bird cage of barked withes. Crouched on the floor of the cage in a little motionless, white heap—

But Kirby closed his eyes. Ivana, cowering against him, gulped as though she were going to be sick. Nini leaned down from above and looked at them with



dilated eyes. Although none of them spoke, all knew that they had found Naida at last.

Kirby was the first to pull himself up. Opening his eyes, he stared long at the white gowned, motionless shape within the cage. Next summing up the whole situation—the cage surrounded by an armed band, the clearing crammed with a thousand ape-men—he shook his head. Afterward, he made a quick movement with his hands.

Ivana, seeing that movement, seeing the expression on his face, started out of her daze.

“No! No! Oh, there must be some other way out for her! There must—”

Her cry, half a shriek, did not change Kirby’s look. What he had done with his hands was to throw a shell into the chamber of his rifle. Now he held the rifle grimly, ready to carry it to his shoulder.

The procession with the bodyguard of ape-men at its head, the renegade Duca and his caciques following

next, and the cage bringing up the rear, advanced relentlessly down the lane to the central stage. The gargoyle-faced ape-man who held the stage alone danced with increasing wildness, writhing, twisting, with weird suppleness. Upon the dancing giant the procession bore down, and before him it finally halted.

The halt left the Duca and the king ape facing each other, and the ape ended his dance. After each had given a salute made by raising their arms, both Duca and the king ape turned to face the creatures who were standing with the cage slung across their shoulders. Whereupon the bearers of the cage advanced with it until they stood between two of the tall poles. There, facing the ominous hole in the center of the clearing, with a pole on either side of them, the ape-men lowered the cage to the ground.

Kirby felt his last hope and courage ebbing. Now he noticed that each pole was equipped with a rope which passed through a hole near its top, like a thread through the eye of a needle. And while he stared at the dangling ropes, the ape-men made one

end of each fast to a ring in the top of the cage. The next instant they leaped back, and began to heave at the other end of the lines.

From the drums came a quicker pounding, a more head-splitting volume of thunder. Over all the ape-people who watched the show, passed a shiver of what seemed to be whole-souled, ecstatic satisfaction. Slowly, as the two ape-men heaved hard, the cage swung off the ground, and slowly rose higher and higher into the moonlit air.

When finally the thing hung high above the heads of the multitude, swaying midway between its tall supports, the ape-men who had done the hoisting fastened their lines to cleats on the poles. Then they turned to the Duca and the giant king who stood behind them, executed a queer, lumbering bow, and fell back to the rear.

The next moment it seemed as though every creature in the clearing—men and those who were only half

men—had gone crazy. The king flung himself into the air as if he were a mass of bounding rubber. Following his lead, the whole assembly let out howls that drowned even the drums, and then began to sway, to squirm, to leap, even as their king was doing before them.

The caciques and the Duca joined in the madness of foul dancing as heartily as any there. Their eyes were flaming, their long robes flapping, their beards streaming.

On his perch in the tree Kirby muttered an oath which was lost, swept away like a breath, in the shrieking turmoil of sound. Then he turned to Ivana.

“They’ve brought Naida here to sacrifice her.”

“But *why*?” Ivana’s sweet face was frozen in lines of horror. “I’ve been able to guess what was going to happen to her. But—*sacrifice*. Why will it be that?”

“Don’t you see?” Looking up to include Nini, Kirby found his hands quivering against his rifle. “It is easy

to understand. In the temple yesterday, what the Duca hoped to do was to kidnap most, or all, of the girls for the ape-people. But he was able to get only Naida. The first result was that the ape-men started to quarrel over the one girl. From what Gori says, trouble started on all sides at once. It became inadvisable to let Naida live. So the Duca, in his shrewdness, planned a sacrifice. By sacrificing Naida, he rids himself of a source of contention amongst the ape-men. He also hopes his act will win favor from his Gods, and make them help him when he is ready to launch a new attempt to capture *all* the girls."

Ivana and Nini looked at each other, then at Kirby, and horror was etched deeper into their faces.

"I think," gulped Ivana, "that you—are right. I—begin to understand."

Nini leaned close to them.

"Tell us, then, *how* this sacrifice is to be made."

Silent at that, Kirby presently made a heavy gesture toward the maelstrom of howling, leaping animals below them.

“I couldn’t guess at first. Now I think I can. They have placed her in that cage and swung it high above the black hole you were afraid of. What can that mean except that she is to be offered to—to—”

It was a monstrous theory which had stunned his hope and courage, and to voice the thing in words was too gruesome.

His bare suggestion, however, made Ivana pass a hand limply over her forehead and look at him with blank, stricken eyes. Nini tottered so uncertainly that Gori, who had remained motionless and silent throughout, had to steady her with muscular arms. If it was impossible for Kirby to utter his fears aloud, he had no need to speak to make them understood.

“And—and we can do nothing?” Nini choked at last.

“You can see for yourself how she is surrounded. If we had been able to get here sooner, we might have done something. Now—”

Kirby’s voice trailed off, and he gave an agonized look at his rifle.

The terrific dance in the clearing was going forward with madness which increased second by second. It had been a general debauch at first, with the whole thousand of the apes bellowing and squirming. Now a change was becoming apparent. Red eyes which had caught the glare of ultimate madness, focused upon the caciques, the Duca, and the great king, all of whom were swaying together on the central stage. As they looked, the horde of ape-men broke loose with a heightened frenzy of noise and movement too overwhelming for Kirby to follow. He leaned forward, making an effort to see what actions of Duca and king could be so influencing the congregation. And then he saw.

Both of those central figures, the one with hair-covered giant’s body and evilly grimacing face, the

other with white robes and whipping silver hair, were definitely emulating the motions of a serpent!

It was as if the angles and joints had disappeared from their bodies. They were become gliding lengths of muscle as swift, as loathsome in their supple dartings and coilings as any snake lashing across the expanses of primeval jungle. Lost in what they did, unconscious of the nightmare, demoniac legion before which they danced, they had eyes only for the empty, ominous hole beneath Naida's cage. As they circled the hole, drawing ever and ever closer to it, they opened and closed their arms with the motion of great serpent jaws biting and striking.

"God in Heaven!" Kirby cried in a voice which shrilled with horror and then broke.

It was not alone the Duca's dance which had wrung the shout from him. As Nina and Ivana shrieked and cowered, as Gori twitched, gasped, buried her head in trembling arms, Kirby knew that Naida was fully aware of what was going on—had been, perhaps, from the beginning.



Slowly, numbly she raised herself from her huddled position, rose to her knees, and clutching with despairing hands at the sides of her cage, looked out from between the bars.

The king and Duca edged closer to the hole until they were dancing upon its very brink. From that position, they stared down into the depths, their faces tense and strained. And then their look became radiant, exalted, joyous. Suddenly the Duca leaped back. He shrieked something at the gargoyle ape, and they flung their arms high in a commanding, mighty signal which was directed across the nightmare legion of ape-men, to the drums.

As Kirby winced in expectancy, the drums ceased to roar. Over the night smashed a hideous concussion of silence, deafening, absolute. And the ape-men—all of them—and the Duca, his caciques, and the king, ceased to dance. As if a whirlwind had hurled them, the caciques scattered in all directions. The Duca, having already leaped back from the gaping orifice, suddenly turned and ran with blurred speed over to the slobbering, deadly still front rank of the

congregation. An instant later the king crouched down beside him, and the whole stage was left bare and deserted.

Kirby gave one look at Naida, found her staring down, deeper and deeper down, into the hole which yawned beneath her so blackly. Then Kirby lowered his eyes until he, too, stared at the opening.

Amidst the pressing silence there stole from the earth an uneasy sound as of some immense thing waking and stirring. Came a hissing note as of escaping steam. The tribes of the ape-men waited in silent rapture. Kirby saw Naida still looking down, and felt Ivana crouch against him, fainting. He held his rifle tighter, and continued to stare.

Something red, like two small flames, licked up above the edge of the pit. Then Kirby gasped and all but went limp. Up and out into the moonlight slid a glistening white lump that moved from side to side and licked at the night with flickering black and red tipped forked tongue.

The glistening white lump was the head of Quetzalcoatl, buried God of the People of the Temple. It was wider and bigger than an elephant's, and the round snake body could not have been encircled by a man's two arms. Kirby guessed at the probable length of the Serpent in terms of hundreds of feet.

Sick, numb, he glanced at Naida, who was still staring silently, and hitched his rifle half up to his shoulder. But he did not look down the sights yet. Although it was time, and more than time, that he fired, he would not do it until the last possible second, when nothing else remained.

Slowly from the hole slid a fifteen or twenty-foot column of the body, and Quetzalcoatl, thus reared, looked about him with a pair of eyes immense and not like snake's eyes, but heavily lidded and lashed; eyes that stared in a wise, evil way; eyes glittering and round and black as ink. After a time the mouth opened in a silent snarl, showing great white fangs and recurved simitars of teeth. The head was snow white, leperous in its scabby, scaly roughness, with here and there a patch of what looked like greenish

fungus. From the rounded body trailed a short, unnatural, sickening growth of—feathers. Old and evil and very wise the Feathered Serpent seemed as his forked tongue flickered in and out and he stared at the ape horde, who stared back silently.

He seemed in no hurry to devote his attention to the cage set forth for his delectation. The black eyes rolled beneath their lashes, staring now at the Duca in his robes, and again at the huddled ape-people. But after ghastly seconds, Quetzalcoatl at last had seen enough.

Again the moonlight glinted against simitar teeth as the great, white, puffy mouth yawned in its silent snarl. Quetzalcoatl reared his head a little higher, slid further from his hole, and then looked up at the dangling cage of barked withes.

In Kirby's mind stirred cloudily a remembrance of moments in the past: the feel of Naida's first kiss, her look as they advanced to the altar in the temple. Then he saw things as they were now, with Naida surrounded by all the tribes of the apes, and with

Quetzalcoatl staring from beneath heavily lidded lashes at the whiteness of her.

Suddenly Kirby stirred to free his shoulder of Ivana's supine weight against it, and he made himself look down his rifle. He let the breath half out of his lungs, and nursed the trigger.

But he did not fire.

All at once he started so violently that he almost hurtled from the tree. Suddenly, trembling, he lowered his rifle.

"Oh, thank God!" he yelped in the silence of the night.

The idea which had transformed him was perhaps the conception of a lunatic. But it was still an idea, and offered a chance.

Again Kirby peered down his rifle. But he no longer aimed at Naida. As Quetzalcoatl lifted white fangs, Kirby aimed deliberately at him, and turned loose his fire.

With the first shot, the Serpent lurched back from the cage, snapped his jaws, and closed evil, black eyes. From one lidded socket squirted dark blood. As a second and third shot crashed into the cavernous fanged mouth, and others ripped into the flat skull, Quetzalcoatl seemed dazed. His head wavered back and forth and his hiss filled the night, but he did nothing.

But all at once Kirby felt that he was *going* to do something in a second, and a great calm came upon him. He quickly jammed home a fresh clip of shells.

“Nini! Ivana! Fire at the Serpent. Give him everything you’ve got! Do you understand? Fire! He thinks that the ape-people have hurt him, and he will be after them in a second. If we have any luck, he will do to them what we never could have done, and maybe destroy himself at the same time! Me, I’m going down there and get Naida now!”

## Chapter 13

No sooner did Kirby see comprehension in the girls' faces than he swung around and let go of his perch. As he crashed, caught the next limb below him, and let go to crash to another, he had all he could do to suppress a yelp of joy. For all at once every voice in the ape congregation was raised in howls and screams of devastated terror.

He did not care how he got down from the tree. Seconds and half seconds were what counted. From the last limb above the ground he swung into space, and a split second later staggered to his feet, clutched his rifle, and started for the clearing. His lungs seemed collapsed and both ankles shattered. He did not care. Not when the ape screams were growing louder with every step he took. Not when he heard Nini and Ivana pouring down from their tree a continuation of the scorching fire he had started.

Panting, his breath only half regained, but steeled to make the fight of his life, he tore from the jungle into the clearing just in time to see a twisting, pain-

convulsed seventy-foot coil of white muscle lash up and strike Naida's cage a blow which knocked it like a ball in the air. Naida screamed and hung to the bars.

But she was all right. It was not against her that Quetzalcoatl was venting his wrath: the blow had been blind accident. As Kirby stood at the clearing's edge, he knew to a certainty that Quetzalcoatl's reaction to sudden pain had been all he had dared hope.

In front of him forty or fifty ape-bodies lay in a crushed heap. While yard after yard of the Serpent's bleached length streamed out of the hole, the hundreds of feet of coils already in the clearing suddenly whipped about a whole squadron of apemen, and with a few constrictions annihilated them as if they had been ants. Across the clearing, the leperous head reared up as high as the trees and swooped down, fangs gleaming. The howls of the apemen trying to flee, the screams of those who had been caught, rose until they became all one scream.



But Kirby had not left the safety of the tree merely to get a ringside view of carnage. He faced his next, his final task unhesitatingly. Straight out he leaped from the shadows of the jungle into the clearing, out into the presence of the beleaguered, screaming ape-men. Well enough he knew that those creatures, despite their frenzy, might sight him and fall upon him at any second; well enough he knew that a single flick of the white coils all over the clearing could crush him instantly. But the time to worry about those hazards would be when they beset him. With a yell as piercing as any in the whole bedlam, Kirby rushed forward.

High up in the moonlit vault of the night, swaying between the two poles which supported it, hung the white cage which was Naida's prison. By the time Kirby had sprinted fifty yards, he knew that his yells had reached Naida. For she staggered to her knees and looked straight at him. A second later, though, he realized that the almost inevitable recognition of him by ape-men had come to pass.

Eight or ten of the creatures, left unmolested for a second by the Serpent, halted in the mad run they

were making for the sheltering jungle, and while one pointed with hairy arm, the others let out shrieks. Kirby gritted his teeth in something like despair. Then he realized that the worst danger—Quetzalcoatl's blurred coils—was not threatening him so far. And he went on, straight toward the ape-men.

He did not look where, how, or at whom he struck. All he knew was that his rifle blazed, and as he clubbed at soft flesh with the butt, blood spurted, and new screams filled the night. He felt and half saw big, stinking bodies going down, and clawed his way forward, around them, over them. Then he felt no more bodies, and knew that he was through. A little farther he ran over the trampled earth, and stopped and looked up.

The howls of the living, the shrieks of the dying deafened him. Renewed shots from the rifles in the tree, made the Serpent lash about in a dazzling white blur, smashing trees, apes, everything in its path. But Kirby, finding himself still safe, scarcely heard or saw. His eyes, turned upward, saw one thing only.

“Naida!”

She had snapped two of the withes of the cage and was leaning forward through the opening. Her face was livid with horror and exhaustion, but she was able to look at him with eyes that glowed.

“You—you came!” she gasped. “You came to me!”

In a flash Kirby jumped over to the poles and began to cast off one of the lines which held the cage aloft.

“Get ready for a bump!” he shouted, as he lowered away, arms straining.

Paying out the one line left the cage suspended from the second, but let it sweep from its position between the poles, down toward one pole. As the thing struck the tall support, Kirby bounded over to stand beneath it, only too sharply aware of the death waiting for him on every side, but ignoring it. Naida still hung suspended a good twenty feet above him, but there was no time to let go the other line. He braced himself and held up his arms.

“Jump!” he yelled.

Then he saw the white gown sweeping down toward him, felt the crash of a soft body against his, and staggered back. Recovered in a tenth of a second, he drew a deep breath, and looked at Naida beside him, tall and brave, unhurt.

“Are you able to run?” he snapped, and then, the moment she nodded, motioned toward the jungle.

Behind them, in front, on all sides, rose screams so horrible that he wondered even then if he would ever forget. As he started to run, he realized that when Naida had finally landed in his arms, the nearest squirming loop of the Serpent had been no more than four yards away, and that, right now, if their luck failed, a single unfortunate twist of the incredible hundreds of feet of white muscle could still end things for them.

But luck was not going to fail. Somehow Kirby knew it as they sprinted side by side, and the sheltering jungle loomed closer every second. And a moment

later, something beside his own inner faith made him know it, too.

“Look, Naida! Look!” he screeched all at once.

At the upper end of the clearing, where an unthinkable slaughter was going on, there leaped out from amongst a surging mass of apes, leaped out from almost directly beneath a downward smashing blur of white snake folds, a figure which Kirby had not seen or thought about for many seconds.

The Duca’s robe hung in tatters from his body. Blood had smeared his white hair. His eyes were those of a man gone mad from fear. And as he escaped the tons of muscle which so nearly had engulfed him, he began to run even as Kirby felt himself running.

Straight toward him and Naida, Kirby saw the man spurt, but whether the mad eyes recognized them or not, he could not tell, nor did he care. All at once his feeling that they would escape the clearing, became conviction.

For suddenly the same single twitch of Quetzalcoatl's vast folds which might have finished them, if luck had not held, put an end to the Duca's retreat. At one moment the man's path was clear. The next—

Kirby, running for dear life, gasped, and heard Naida cry out beside him.

The great loops flashed, twisted, and where had been an open way for the Duca, loomed a wall of scaly white flesh. The living wall twitched, closed in; and as the Duca dodged and leaped to no avail, a cry shrilled across the night—a cry that cut like a knife.

Kirby saw no more. But it was likely that most, if not all, of the caciques had gone with the Duca.

Somehow, anyhow, in but a few seconds more, Kirby dove into the spot from which he had left the jungle to enter the clearing. As Naida pressed against him, winded but still strong, he found his best hopes for immediate retreat realized, for Gori, Nini, and Ivana, down from their tree, ran toward them.

“She is all right,” he said with a gesture which cut short the outbursts ready to come. “But we’ve got to keep going. Ivana, tell Gori that her people are gone, wiped out, but that if she will cast her lot with us, we will not forget what she has done. Come on!”

With Gori leading them they ran, stumbling, recovering themselves, stumbling again. To breathe became an agony. But not until many minutes later, when they plowed into the cover of a fern belt whose blackness not even the moonlight had pierced, did Kirby call a halt.

Here he swept a final glance behind him, listened long for sounds of pursuit, and relaxed a little only when none came to disturb the night stillness. However, that relaxation, now that he permitted it at last, meant something.

The complete silence gave him final conviction that what he had said about the whole ape-people being destroyed was true. As for the Serpent—well, perhaps he was destroyed even as they were. Perhaps not. In any case the grip which Quetzalcoatl held upon the

imagination of the People of the Temple had been destroyed by this night's work, and that was what counted most. The Serpent would be worshipped no longer.

Kirby reached out in the darkness and found Naida's hand.

"Come along," he said to all of the party. "I think the past is—the past. And with Gori to guide us out of the jungle, and our own brains to guide us through the jungle of self-government after that, I think the future ought to be bright enough."

Ivana and Nini both chuckled as they moved again, and Gori, hearing her name spoken in a kindly voice, twitched her ears appreciatively. Naida drew very close to Kirby.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked presently.

"The—temple," he answered.



“About the crown which probably is still lying on the altar there?”

Kirby looked up in surprise.

“Why, I had forgotten about that!”

“What was it, then?”

“But what could I have been thinking about except how you looked when we came together in that gloomy place, and walked forward, side by side? *Now* have I told you enough?”

Naida laughed.

“There is so much to be done!” Kirby exclaimed then. “As soon as possible, we must climb to the Valley of the Geyser, go on into the outer world, and there seek carefully for men who are willing, and fit, to come here. And that is only one task. Others come crowding to me every second. But first—”

“What?” Naida asked softly.

“The temple. Naida, we will reach the plateau sometime to-morrow. All of the girls who kept watch there will be waiting for us, and it will be a time of happiness. May we not, then, go to the temple? There will be no priests. But we will make our pledges without them. Tell me, may I hope that it will be so—to-morrow?”

Naida did not answer at once. She did not even nod. But presently her shoulder, still fragrant with faint perfume, brushed his. She clasped his hand then, and as they walked on in silence, Kirby knew.